

## **“The Bishop within the Communion of Faith, Hope, and Love”**

### **The second in a series of articles on the office of the bishop by members of the Archdiocesan Theological Commission**

The bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) emphasized that the church is a communion, a *communio*, a union of unique and diverse persons living in and through the Spirit of Christ. The one Spirit dwells in all the members many though they be, and holds them together in the bond of faith, hope, and love.

At the core of Catholic faith is the profession of belief in the One God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. By faith we know that in the life of God there is diversity in unity (the three are God) and unity in diversity (the one God is revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit). Mysterious as the life of God may be, it gives us a clue about what the life of the Church is: a *communio* of diversity in unity (many local churches or dioceses in one universal Church) and unity in diversity (one universal Catholic Church in many local churches or dioceses). The church lives by the gift of the Spirit through which we share in the communion of the life of the One God – Father, Son and Spirit.

The church is a *communio* of all the baptized. The church is not primarily a structure of hierarchy and laity, the “church teaching” and the “church taught,” but rather an organic communion of the baptized, living in the Spirit, enriched by different gifts and ministries. The church cannot be identified solely with the pope, or bishops, or priests, or those who publically profess religious vows. There are diverse expressions of *communio*: there is the *communio* among the ordained, the *communio* between the bishop and priests, the *communio* among bishops throughout the world, and the *communio* between the Pope and the all the other bishops. However, all of these are rooted in a more fundamental universal *communio* of baptized believers in the church, a *communio* which is a share in the life of the One God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Within this most basic *communio* these other expressions of *communio* serve to order or structure the life of the church so that it more clearly manifests the *communio* of Father, Son, and Spirit.

The role of the bishop, or archbishop, is best understood in light of this *communio*. As part of the *communio* the bishop also serves as its leader and visible unifier. His ministry as chief shepherd in the diocese, symbolized in the shepherd’s staff or crozier, is essential to the life of the *communio*. Without the bishop the faith community is not a church but only a gathering of believers. This understanding of the bishop as a member of the *communio* and as its leader, was expressed crisply in the words of the Saint Augustine, himself a bishop: “For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian.” In his Apostolic Exhortation on the life and ministry of bishops, *Pastores Gregis*, Pope John Paul II wrote: “As a gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, the bishop is above all else, like every other Christian, a son and member of the church. From his holy mother he has received the gift of the divine life in the sacrament of baptism . . . Together with all the faithful he shares in the incomparable dignity of the children of God, a dignity to be lived out in communion. . . On the other hand, by virtue of the fullness of the sacrament of holy orders, the bishop is also the one who, before the faithful, is teacher, sanctifier and shepherd, charged with acting in the name and in the person of Christ” (PG 10). Through his ordination, the bishop is indeed “before” the other faithful. But this finds expression in his “being for” the other members of the faithful while not detracting from his “being with” them (PG 10).