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Conciliarity and dispersed authority from Nicaea to the Archbishops' Council

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Abstract

Nicaea and the local church culture from which it emerged are examined to reveal that the lower clergy and laity had a distinct role in acclamation. They voted in episcopal elections and enjoyed a more intimate relation with their bishop. These elements of a dispersed authority are then used to critique contemporary governance in the Church of England as under- and over-centralised and to call for a renewal of a Dionysian understanding of hierarchy as enabling a more spiritual understanding both of episcopacy and of the participation of the whole people of God.

Keywords: authority; Cyprian of Carthage; participation; pseudo-Dionysius; Richard Hooker

Introduction

Although the Council of Nicaea was the first attempt at a world-wide coming together of the whole Church to determine doctrine and thus might be regarded as a move towards conformity and centralisation, it also affirmed the importance of each local bishop and, as we shall see, even allowed for the participation of a larger group of laity and clergy in acclamation. This article examines the relation between centralised and dispersed authority in the fourth century and in today's Church of England, examining how far Anglican governance has strayed from the principle of subsidiarity. We shall see how much we have lost in terms of the role of acclamation and consensus, and how a loss of the hierarchical dimension has made us less not more participatory and encouraged more centralised and secular modes of authority.

Centralised and dispersed authority at the time of the Council of Nicea

The conciliarity of bishops meeting in council was balanced by the canons they agreed, which while assuming a universal reach, in some cases also confirmed

the dispersed authority of the local churches and provinces.¹ For example, canon 15 prohibited clergy from wandering into other cities to officiate, and canon 16 excommunicated those who refused to return home, which, although a universal ruling, operated to bolster the authority of the local bishop.² Although the council was primarily a meeting of bishops, each will have had an entourage of deacons and presbyters, with Athanasius famously a deacon accompanying Alexander, bishop of Alexandria. Sylvester, bishop of Rome was represented by two presbyters, Victor and Vicentius, whose names are on the lists of signatories.³ Moreover, the council was convened by a layman, Constantine, who sat among the bishops. With so many clergy attending, of all three orders, the council's deliberations bore out Cyprian's third century episcopal practice in Carthage, 'to do nothing on my own private opinion without [presbyters' and deacons'] advice and without the consent of the people'.⁴

Although very soon after the Council of Nicaea all its key acts were reversed, Arius' exile was revoked and an empire-wide struggle ensued, its theology did eventually win out and the significance of the council remains. Traditionally 318 but probably something nearer 200–250 bishops from all over the Christian world, from as far as Persia and Spain, did meet and find consensus, with only a handful holding out against the majority, so that the image of a unified orthodoxy shown in icons of the Council with circles of bishops in orderly rows is accurate.⁵ Nicaea was also the most representative council since that of Jerusalem in chapter 15 of the Book of Acts. It was, of course, a dispersed authority, with no bishop of Rome presiding or even present, merely represented by the two presbyters. It would be down to the Emperor himself, as central embodiment of secular *potestas*, to call the council, although he then sat in a seat like any other participant, and did not direct the discussion.

The *Acta* of the Council of Nicaea are lost but we know from various sources that the icon of an episcopal circle does not tell the whole story of who was present. The imperial coffers usually paid for a team of two presbyters and three deacons for each bishop, and there were a number of lay people present also, so there was something like a thousand participants. In his study about voting practices in early church councils, Ramsay MacMullen demonstrates that it was normal practice at such councils for these other clergy to join in the discussions and even in the acclamations, which were the method of gaining consensus as they had been in the Roman senate on which Church councils were modelled.⁶ Bishops sat in blocs

¹ S Tanner and P Norman (eds), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols (London, 1990), vol 1, 6–19.

² *Ibid.*, 1, 8–9.

³ Various lists survive in a number of languages, although these are regarded as incomplete. See H Gelzer, H Hilgenfeld and O Cuntz (eds), *Patrum Nicaenorum Nomina Latine, Graece, Coptice, Syriace, Arabice, Armeniace, Sociata Opera* (Leipzig, 1898). The Roman presbyters are included in all versions, signing as representatives of their bishop.

⁴ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistles*, in A Roberts and J Donaldson (eds) (A Cleveland Gore rev), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols (Edinburgh, 1995), V, Ep 5, 4, 283.

⁵ On the likely attendance figures, see I Mladjov's 'List of Signatories', in Y Kim (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* (Cambridge, 2020), Appendix 1, 368–377. The traditional figure of 318 was based on the number of Abraham's servants in Gen 14.14.

⁶ R MacMullen, *Voting about God in the Early Church Councils* (New Haven, CT, 2020), 79. See also an overview of the participation of the laity in early councils by C Guarneri, 'Nota sulla presenza dei laici ai concili fino al V secolo' (1983) 20 *Vetere Christianorum* 77–91.

according to their provinces and according to their original position *vis-à-vis* the topic under discussion. Speeches would be greeted by chorus-like acclamations: 'God is one! Christ is one! The bishop is one'.⁷ These were modelled on the responses of the *demos* to the emperor at games or visits, but in this context could be quite challenging. This democratic element by which the participants made their views known is one of four chosen by MacMullen to describe the nature of voting at councils, the others being the cognitive, the supernatural and the violent. As Rowan Williams put it, 'orthodoxy is *constructed* in the processes of both theological and political conflict', which is something of an understatement to describe the way doctrinal differences led to conflict, ranging from occasions when oppositional theological singing got out of hand to mobs rampaging and killing or imperial pressure on conformity forcing apologies out of reluctant bishops to avoid exile.⁸

Democracy

While I do not under-estimate the overt and underhand ways that majorities could be manipulated, there is nonetheless a strong democratic and participatory element in the practices of early Church councils like Nicaea, which MacMullen emphasises. Truth could out even when a bishop getting up to preach was physically muzzled by an Arian archdeacon at Antioch in 361. He managed to hold up three fingers from his free hand, then one, for the congregation to understand he stood for the unity of the Trinity and they responded by jumping up and down in delight with many acclamations.⁹ Such strong-arm tactics could misfire even before less sympathetic audiences, because coercion could be adduced against the legitimacy of a council's resolutions. The *demos* therefore, is always involved and frequently expressive, so much so that at moments of high tension at a council whole swathes of the audience in the words of MacMullen 'may en masse rise from their seats and surge forward to the front of the hall, there to fling themselves down before the session-president and clasp his knees or his feet, crying out to him'.¹⁰

This participatory practice also characterises episcopal elections of the Nicæan period, which Henry Chadwick avers were always unruly.¹¹ Naturally, the local hierarchy had favoured candidates whom it sometimes tried to impose but it was still a democratic process involving the whole people of God and they were capable of shouting down the official choice and ensuring their own candidate was elected, as was the case in the election of Cyprian himself at Carthage.¹² We know that Augustine of Hippo deliberately avoided visiting cities where there was an episcopal vacancy, lest he be elected, wanting to maintain his quasi-monastic scholarly life, only to be surrounded by enthusiastic lay supporters in Hippo and made priest, with the bishop Valerius of Carthage soon appointing him co-adjutor bishop, as diocesans

⁷ MacMullen (note 6), 13.

⁸ R Williams, Preface, *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1989), ix.

⁹ MacMullen (note 6), 63.

¹⁰ MacMullen (note 6), 117.

¹¹ H Chadwick, *The Early Church, Penguin History of the Church Vol. 1* (London, 1967), 50.

¹² J Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (London, 2002), 16–17.

do suffragans today.¹³ We can be sure that his election to the see of Hippo, however, was truly by acclamation.

The role of the laity

The history of the Nicene Creed, with its sixty years of ups and downs, changes of imperial allegiance, and political entangling, is an example of the *sensus fidei fidelium* eventually winning out, to assert that the Son is truly divine. The Arian position, which accorded him only a semi-divine status, sought to preserve the oneness of God, and believed this was compromised by the Nicaean statement. In some ways it represented a conservative position. And yet Arius' answer involved making of the Godhead a distant deity, in a monotheism in which the Son was only semi-divine and still a creature, and the manner of our redemption and participation in God was problematised and the incarnation itself undermined.¹⁴ As Gregory Nazianzus put it, 'That which was not assumed is not healed, but that which is united to God is saved'.¹⁵

No wonder, therefore, that it was lay people who kept the faith during the time of persecution of Nicene belief, because it affected their own salvation. Bishop after bishop temporalised, often to avoid losing their position, like the bishop of Rome, Liberius, who first stood firm with the proscribed Athanasius, but was then exiled to Thrace. Although the people refused to accept the deacon Felix put in his place, Liberius lost patience and signed a Eusebian retraction.¹⁶ It is understandable that the powerful gave in because they were picked on and had most to lose, but this reality emphasises the value of the ordinary laity, monks and lower clergy in keeping the Nicaean faith alive.

Lessons for the Church of England

There is much that today's Church of England may learn from this often violent but lively third and fourth century Church about lay participation, the role of the bishop, and dispersed authority.

The devaluation of inherited forms of church

First, we have a similar situation to that which pertained in the period after the Council of Nicaea today, when Arianism was in the ascendent among the powerful. Over a number of years many close to the top of the Church of England hierarchy, while paying lip service to Anglican liturgies, practices, orders and polity, have

¹³ Augustine of Hippo, *Letters*, in J G Cunningham (trans), *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, 14 vols (Edinburgh, 2001), 1, Letter 21, to Valerius, 237–239 describes how Augustine was forced by acclamation and bishop Valerius into ordination, and how unprepared he felt for the office.

¹⁴ B Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford, 2018), 98–100.

¹⁵ B Storin, Gregory Nazianzus, 'Letter 101 to Cledonius,' in M Delcogliano (ed), *Christ through the Nestorian Controversy*, Cambridge edition of early Christian writings Volume 3 (Cambridge, 2022), 388–398 at 392.

¹⁶ For an alternative interpretation of Liberius's actions, see G McCashen, 'Liberius, Athanasius and the Roman Synod' (2023) 74 *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 1–17.

begun to devalue them as ‘inherited forms of church’.¹⁷ Money from central funds distributed by the Church Commissioners ignores the need to support our polity by funding priests in parishes and too often supports worship devoid of any Anglican element in liturgy or order. It funds so-called parochial resource churches which routinely ignore Canon B14 (the presumption that Holy Communion ought to be celebrated in at least one church in every benefice each Sunday and principal feast days), and turns a blind eye to a number of examples of lay celebration in new worshipping communities.¹⁸ There are a number of bishops unhappy with these developments in funding and theology who also resent the time they and their staff have to spend getting complex grant applications written, but they are too subsumed by the system to offer much defence, although one must honour those who do protest, as the Bishop of Hereford did recently.¹⁹ Notably, an attempt by the Bishops of Hereford and Bath and Wells to restore funding back to parish ministry was strongly supported by majorities of laity and clergy at the General Synod in July 2025 but lost in the House of Bishops, with only nine in favour and twenty-two against.²⁰ As at the time of Nicaea, it is the laity and lower clergy who hold the faith.

Another aspect of the abandonment of ‘inherited church’ can be seen in the downgrading of the ordained ministry. Evidence for this can be found on many diocesan websites about vocation, which often hide information about discerning a calling to ordained ministry deeply within their site, where it is given little emphasis or theological rationale. Liverpool diocese is not untypical in having a generic ‘Lifecall’ site, with the main picture a young woman in a flowery dress, who is presumably lay.²¹ Among the roles on the next level down there is one discreet dog collar among the eight role pictures, but this person is in hospital clothes and is accompanied by a stethoscope, so showing a minister in secular employment and giving no message about the possibility of full-time parochial ministry. Typically, this website claims to be about Christian vocation but offers only church roles for laity and has nothing about the value of secular work as a lay calling. The laity are here being called to take the ministerial roles proper to clergy, while their own distinctive contribution as laity in the wider world is ignored. Yet despite all this, it is the laity in the lowest form of polity, the parish, who keep the faith, recite the Nicene creed – vanished from so much worship elsewhere – and long for Holy Communion which is now in many places a rare luxury. These people, in the words of St Lawrence, are the treasures of the Church and it is by the faithfulness of parish priests and their congregations, that orthodoxy, right praise, continues.

¹⁷ The term first appeared in the report, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London, 2004), 96 but is now ubiquitous.

¹⁸ See the research by G Lings, *Encountering the Day of Small Things* (Sheffield, 2017), 199.

¹⁹ ‘Shrink grants in favour of funding parish clergy, Bishop of Hereford urges Church Commissioners’, *Church Times*, 12 June 2025: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/13-june/news/uk/shrink-grants-in-favour-of-funding-parish-clergy-bishop-of-hereford-urges-church-commissioners> (accessed 25 August 2025).

²⁰ See the record of voting at www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/business-done-am-sat-12.7.25.pdf (accessed 25 August 2025).

²¹ See <https://lifecall.uk/> (accessed 25 August 2025).

A lack of democracy

A second way in which the early Church questions our contemporary understanding follows from this, as the failure to enable true participation of the whole people of God. It is ironic that even within the imperial world of late antiquity, the role of the people was honoured and contributed to the establishment of Nicaean orthodoxy and that with all our synodical structures, there is less opportunity for real participation in today's Church of England.

The element of consent by the people, which Cyprian emphasises, is a feature of key British institutions, such as the monarchical order and the Church of England, in which the *sensus populum* or *sensus fidelium* is an essential element in its ecclesiology. At the time of the Reformation, John Jewel cites Cyprian in this regard in his *Apology*. In contrast to the current Roman Church, 'yet in old time, when the church of God (if ye will compare it with their church) was very well governed, both elders and deacons, as saith Cyprian, and certain also of the common people, were called thereunto and made acquainted with ecclesiastical matters'.²² Richard Hooker agreed in the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*: 'no ecclesiastical law be made in a Christian commonwealth, without the consent of the laity as the clergy, but least of all without the consent of the highest power'.²³ Hooker wrote at a time of a unified Christian state and Parliament, embodied in an anointed monarch. The Church of England still has a Christian King acting as Supreme Governor and its own parallel quasi-parliamentary system of lay and clerical representation but has quite lost the power of the ecclesial *demos*, so energetically active in the time of Nicaea and which the Roman Catholic Church is seeking to return to through its synodical process, which is about consensus rather than legislation, and seeks to be more inclusive. After the torturous negotiations in Canterbury diocese to gain representatives to join the electoral college to choose the next Archbishop of Canterbury fitting the tight criteria by which the General Synod blithely constrained them in February 2025, who can argue that what results is the fruit of a participatory ecclesial *demos*? Andrew Goddard pointed out a whole catalogue of bizarre results owing to these complicated requirements, including the election of two people who had received no first preference votes at all, while 13 of the 17 finally elected had between them only 23 of the 88 first preference votes.²⁴

The modern synodical voting procedure is secular in its understanding of the electoral system and works with small numbers of representatives: the older practice depended upon a broader theology of the *sensus populum* as the *sensus fidei fidelium*: the whole people receiving a truly divine inspiration and practising an almost visceral sensing of true doctrine. For Cyprian of Carthage in episcopal elections, the voice of the people was understood by him as the voice of God, working through choice (*iudicium*), *testimonium* (testimony about the candidates by clergy and laity),

²² J Jewel, *Apology of the Church of England*, John Booty (ed) (New York, 2002), 105.

²³ R Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1845), VIII, vi, 8, vol 2, 544.

²⁴ See A Goddard, 'What is wrong with the canterbury appointment process?' at <https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/what-is-going-wrong-with-the-canterbury-appointment-process/> (accessed 24 August 2025).

election (*suffragium*) and their agreement (consensus).²⁵ Paul Fitzgerald argues that such practices were common if not universal in the early centuries of the Church, and Cyprian himself accepts the validity of the ordinations of bishops in Rome and Spain precisely because they include the whole people in decision-making.

Paradoxically, we need to look to the Roman Catholic Church for an articulation of this authority of the laity. In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman wrote: 'the tradition of the Apostles [is] committed to the whole Church in its various constituents and functions *per modum unius*, but the bishops and the lay faithful bear witness to it in diverse ways'.²⁶ The tradition, he says, 'manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors, sometimes by the people, sometimes by liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history'.²⁷ I would argue that it is the ordinary parish clergy and laity today who maintain the tradition of the apostles, but who are failed by the instruments of our so-called dispersed authority. Too often deanery and diocesan synods allow only written questions in advance, have stitched-up, closely managed agendas, and smother debate, so that local people can see little reason to serve on them.

The loss of a connection between bishop, clergy and laity

A third way in which the early Church reveals a dispersed authority is in the intimacy and close connection between the bishop and his clergy and laity. By the time of Nicaea, the bishop was well established as the holder of jurisdiction within his diocese (although it is important to remember that the term, diocese, is a later one in regular ecclesial use, dating from the Carolingian era).²⁸ He combined both *auctoritas*, moral authority, with juridical authority or *potestas*.²⁹ From the time of Ignatius of Antioch, who made use of his approaching martyrdom to give authority to his teaching about the episcopate, the bishop sought to be the focus of unity. Ignatius writes to the Ephesians:

Thus it is proper for you to act together in harmony with the mind of your bishop ... for your presbyterate which is worthy of its name and worthy of God is attuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre ... in your unanimity and harmonious love Jesus Christ is sung. You must join this chorus, every one of you, so that by being harmonious and taking your pitch from God you may sing in union with one voice the Jesus Christ to the Father, in order that he may hear you and on the basis of which you do well, acknowledge that you are

²⁵ See P Granfield, 'Episcopal Elections in Cyprian: Clerical and Lay Participation' (1976) 37 *Theological Studies* 41–53.

²⁶ J Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, J Coulson (ed) (London, 1961), 63, originally published in *The Rambler* (July 1959).

²⁷ Newman (note 26), 63.

²⁸ See J Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire* (Cambridge, 2015), 56.

²⁹ K Pollmann, 'Christianity and authority in late antiquity: the transformation of the concept of *auctoritas*' in C Harrison (ed), *Being a Christian in Late Antiquity: a Festschrift for Gillian Clark* (Oxford, 2014), 156–174 at 163.

members of his Son. It is therefore, advantageous for you to be in perfect unity in order that you may always have a share in God.³⁰

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, martyred in 258, writing on church unity at a time of schism in the North African church uses this same analogy of a unified sound.³¹ The Church in both Ignatius and Cyprian consists of all the people, and each part has its own role and dignity: the clergy are the strings, the laity the chorus – note again the importance of voice. As we have seen, it is by their acclamation or *suffragium* which they give in episcopal election that Christian people offer their voice to contribute to the ecclesial music. We know that in North Africa, moreover, that lay people and clerics are also included with the bishop in deciding the penance and establishing the sincerity of erstwhile schismatics.³²

Yet the unity of bishop and people described in these examples is primarily a liturgical one, so that together ‘Jesus Christ is sung’: they offer Christ to the Father in their unity as the Church. What Ignatius’ image is delineating is a hierarchy. By this word I do not mean a static social stratification, which is what the word has come to mean in modern times, but its original spiritual and mystical usage by Dionysius the Areopagite, who coined the word in his two works, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which are usually dated to the early sixth century. Although they post-date Cyprian and indeed the Council of Nicaea, they describe a Christianised Neo-Platonism which was the common theological currency of the early Church. As Dionysius conceives it a hierarchy has a threefold meaning. It is a sacred order by which the world is brought into union with God, and as such is both ‘a state of understanding and an activity’.³³ It is essentially dynamic, seeking to raise beings to be at one with God. Dionysius uses vivid images to express this:

Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and of God himself. It ensures that when its members have received this full and divine splendour they can then pass on this light generously and in accordance with God’s will to beings further down the scale.³⁴

As the image of unity, the individual bishop, in communion with other bishops, bears this hierarchical role of reflecting out this unified life and drawing others up into its perfection. The early church custom of the *fermentum*, by which a bishop sent a particle of consecrated bread from his eucharist to his priests’ altars to be mixed in the chalice is an expression of this unity and of hierarchical relation, whereby the bishop seeks to communicate the perfection of the divine oneness.³⁵

³⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, ‘Letter to the Ephesians’, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (note 4), 1, 49–58, at 51.

³¹ Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (note 4), 5, 421–429, at 424.

³² J Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (London, 2002), 135 and P Fitzgerald, ‘A Model for Dialogue: Cyprian of Carthage on Ecclesial Discernment’ (1998) 59.2 *Theological Studies* 236–253.

³³ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, in C Luibheid and Paul Rorem (eds), *The Celestial Hierarchy, The Complete Works* (London, 1987), 164D, 153.

³⁴ Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 165A, 154.

³⁵ J Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries*, E Theokritoff (trans) (Brookline MS, 2001), 226–227.

For the bishop or hierarchy is the prime operator of the sacraments, the material means by which human mixed physical and spiritual beings are brought to union with God and to perfection, while for Dionysius the deacon mediates purification and the priest illumination. So not only is the working of the hierarchy dynamic, transforming and uplifting the participants, it is mutually enriching. All Christians are mirrors of the divine light, reflecting that light back to God and outward to their brothers and sisters, communicating the divine gifts.

So even the bishop both gives and receives. Augustine writes: 'what I am with you consoles me. What I am for you terrifies me. For you I am a bishop, but with you I am, after all, a Christian. The first is the name of an office; the second is the name of grace'.³⁶ Interestingly, this passage was recently quoted by Leo XIV in his first address as pope.³⁷ But it is a mutuality also commented upon by Cyprian. The bishops assembled with their advisors at Nicaea therefore would have had something close to this hierarchical understanding of their role. In the *Didascalia*, written about this time or a little earlier, bishops are described as:

Priests and prophets, and princes and leaders and kings, and mediators between God and the faithful, and receivers of the word, and preachers and proclaimers thereof, and knowers of the Scriptures and of the utterances of God, and witnesses of his will, who bear the sins of all, and are to give answers for all.³⁸

Although there is a pronounced monarchical element here, the primary role of the bishop is spiritual, theological and pedagogical, as teacher and mediator of the things of God. The responsibility he holds for the faithful accords with his hierarchical role and is quite terrifying in its responsibility, so that no wonder Augustine sought to avoid the episcopate. Bishops could, however, feel their insignificance, and we have a group of them as reported in the *Acta* of a council in Rome in 532 saying, 'we are insignificant bishops in small towns and we do not speak for the [church] as a whole'.³⁹ It is true that bishops of provincial centres had more *auctoritas*, but they certainly acted communally as a college, as those responsible for the salvation of their faithful, which was the issue at stake at Nicaea and later councils.

Anglicanism too, through the mystical tradition, has been influenced by Dionysius's writings and understanding of hierarchy. The Church of England's chief ecclesial theorist, Richard Hooker, shows a strong Dionysian element in his theology of hierarchy and participation. He will have read Dionysius directly and also experienced his theology as mediated by Aquinas, who is a central influence in his work.⁴⁰ Like Dionysius, Hooker stresses the role of the angelic orders, as a 'pattern

³⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons*, vol III, in *The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-First Century*, E Hill (trans), J Rotelle (ed) (New York, 1994), 292–294, at 292.

³⁷ See Vatican News Agency at <https://www.ewtnvatican.com/articles/all-the-saints-and-church-fathers-pope-leo-xiv-quoted-in-his-first-week-5407> (accessed 25 August 2025).

³⁸ R Connolly (ed), *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford, 1929), VIII, 80.

³⁹ MacMullen (note 6), 108.

⁴⁰ Hooker cites Dionysius by name three times in the *Laws*, at I, iii, 4, V, lxii, 7 and VII, v 4. See also P Dominiack, *Richard Hooker: The Architecture of Participation* (London, 2020), 141–148.

and a spur' to us in enabling our prayer and our moral and spiritual transformation.⁴¹ Moreover, through the second eternal law the whole creation participates in God through a hierarchical order. In Book 1 he writes that 'there is in all things an appetite or desire, whereby they incline to something which they may be; and when they are it, they shall be perfecter than they are now'.⁴² All things 'covet more or less the participation of God himself' and Hooker regards the universe as a vast pleroma of what Rowan Williams in his Hooker lecture describes as 'compatible variety'.⁴³

For Hooker the Church herself is a sacrament and thus offers the operation of the sacraments like the hierarchs of Dionysius's *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, through which we are formed Christologically and united to God. In his description of a good bishop, Hooker puts first and foremost an 'angelic' character and a radiance of mind deriving from 'deep meditation of holy things and as it were conversation of God'.⁴⁴ A S McGrade, citing this passage from Hooker, continues 'to some it will seem unreal to expect anyone to shine as an angel of God in this day and age, but "shine they must" Hooker says of bishops'.⁴⁵ He fails to acknowledge that in likening bishops to angels, Hooker is not so much expecting bishops to be perfect but rather invoking Dionysius and the hierarchical role of the angels in raising us to God through the virtues and divine qualities they embody and contemplate. Despite his historical situation as one in which bishops are involved in government of the realm, Hooker puts their role in effecting the mystical union of the faithful first.

With all this in mind, a council like Nicaea can be seen as a hierarchical activity in which the faith of the Church is to be purified, illumined and perfected. This parallels the subject of the debate itself, which centres on the manner in which the Son shares in the life of the Father, and raises humanity with him into the divine life. As an ecumenical council, with invitations going out to bishops throughout the known world, Nicaea was a model of participation, including every part of the Church (who could manage to attend) in coming to a common mind. Its synodical letter and decisions about Arius, its canons and date of Easter were to be held by all, but in theory at least, were the decision of the whole Church.

As was mentioned earlier, the content of the canons in some cases, however, enabled the authority of the local church, with canon 15 stopping dissident clergy hopping from diocese to diocese. Giving honour to the bishop of Jerusalem was also a decentralising action, dispersing quasi-metropolitan authority more widely.⁴⁶ Moreover, the fact that Constantine called the council demonstrated that there was as yet no one central Christian authority with the power to do this. Furthermore, Daniel H Williams points out that even the Nicene Creed itself was not intended to supplant the local baptismal creeds that varied from place to place. The Nicene

⁴¹ Hooker (note 23), I, xvi, 5, 224.

⁴² Hooker (note 23), I, v, 1, 162.

⁴³ Hooker (note 23), I, v, 2, 162; R Williams, 'The laws of ecclesiastical polity revisited', <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2107/the-richard-hooker-lecture-richard-hooker-c1554-1600-the-laws-of-ecclesiastical-polity-revisited.html>, no page nos (accessed 25 August 2025).

⁴⁴ Hooker (note 23), VII, xxiv, 15.

⁴⁵ A McGrade, 'Richard Hooker on Episcopacy and Bishops, Good and Bad' (2002) 2 *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 2: 28–43, at 45.

⁴⁶ Tanner and Norman (note 1), 16–19.

Creed, he argues, served rather as a theological hermeneutic or a commentary, quoting Rowan Williams to the effect that the Church was 'unable to avoid reflection on its defining conditions, unable to avoid a conscious and critical reworking of its heritage, unable, in short, to avoid theology'.⁴⁷

Catholic Social Teaching which has an honoured place ever since *Quadragesimo Anno* for the principle of subsidiarity, does not deny the need for agreed central action or authority, but only that decision-making be taken at the most appropriate level, with a privileging of the lowest possible where possible.⁴⁸ It is important to remember that the principle of subsidiarity, if not the word itself, is an Anglican as well as a Catholic emphasis, most notably represented by the pre-war Christendom Movement and Anglican Guild Socialism, which sought decentralisation, the revival of the craft guilds and local worker control.⁴⁹

With a question of the status of the Son of God, it was surely right to decide as a whole Church together. Yet, as I have demonstrated, this central council enabled a very full element of participation, which reflected a dispersed authority. According to Edward Norman, writing in this *Journal* over two decades ago, Anglicanism claims to share something of this same dispersed authority and he quotes a 1948 Anglican Communion Report: 'Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the ministry of word and sacrament, the witness of saints and the *consensus fidelium* – it is thus a dispersed authority having many elements which combine, interact with, and check each other'.⁵⁰ Norman then points out acidly that all this is actually a substitute for Anglican ecclesiology, which we totally lack.

Towards a more satisfactory ecclesiology

So, can Nicaea and its ecclesial world help us towards a more satisfactory ecclesiology, which balances central and dispersed authority? I would argue that it can be a useful corrective to the contemporary mechanisms of participation I have criticised. First, as I have demonstrated the council, but also episcopal elections enabled wide participation by all orders of clergy and laity in acclamation and suffrage and offer a model of how we could include the lay *sensus fidelis fidelium*. Secondly, it shows us how we have lost and need to restore the balance of proper collegiality and dispersed authority of the episcopate, which was so evident at the council. At present, our bishops do have in theory dispersed authority to do what they like in their own dioceses: forty-two little fiefdoms. One will lavish care and attention on its clergy and find ways to support struggling parishes, while another will carve it up into minster communities with a cleric expected to minister to 35 churches, with only one stipendiary colleague. So many back-room

⁴⁷ D Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), 159 and quoting Williams, *Arius*, 236–237 at 171.

⁴⁸ Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, May 15, 1931 at https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno_en.html, §79 (accessed 25 August 2025).

⁴⁹ See G Cole, *Guild Socialism* (London, 1920) and M Reckitt, *Faith and Society* (London, 1934).

⁵⁰ E Norman, 'Authority in the Anglican communion' (1999) 24 *Ecc LJ* 172–87, at 185.

administrative tasks could be shared but are not. The Church of England could have a central pay-roll system, for example, for all diocesan and cathedral staffs and take on centrally a number of administrative tasks, while the Church Commissioners could oversee the investing of the assets of Diocesan Stipends Funds. The principle of subsidiarity does not preclude the centralisation of tasks best carried out in that way, so long as they do not remove agency and authority from the local. So, in some ways we need a more centralised system.

On the other hand, our bishops are less independent than their clergy. They now have to take an oath of obedience to their archbishop without any get-out-of-jail conscience equivalent of the lower clergy's offering obedience only 'in all things lawful and honest' as Rupert Bursell has pointed out.⁵¹ Bishops have a College of Bishops in which to gather, with no relation to General Synod, with a smaller body of diocesans and a few suffragans acting as the House of Bishops at General Synod. A number of diocesans sit in the House of Lords, where they appear to work as a team, with agreed positions on all issues, rather than as individuals.

On the Church of England website, the House of Bishops is described as meeting 'in May and December outside of General Synod to discuss issues such as episcopal ministry, mission and national issues that affect the Church'.⁵² There is no suggestion here that their role has a theological and spiritual dimension, or indeed, that this should be their primary function, as guardians of the faith. Yet this is part of their legal status: 'Under Article 7 of the Constitution of General Synod, the House of Bishops has a special role with matters relating to doctrine, liturgy or Sacrament'. This awkward sentence paraphrases: 'A provision touching doctrinal formulae or the services or ceremonies of the Church of England or the administration of the sacraments or sacred rites thereof shall, before it is finally approved by the General Synod, be referred to the House of Bishops, and shall be submitted for such final approval in terms proposed by the House of Bishops and not otherwise'.⁵³ This allows the House of Bishops to frame proposed legislation with regard to doctrinal or liturgical matters but gives them no more theological authority than that, apart from a veto in Synod. In practice, the College and House of Bishops spend more time discussing practical matters like safeguarding than doctrine, although there was a little flurry of theology at a proposal to have a *God as Creator* liturgy in one recent meeting.⁵⁴ The idea that our bishops might spend several months with a team of theological experts debating doctrinal issues is beyond believable in the contemporary Church. We have weakened their role in preserving the faith and we have through the arms of Archbishop's Council and House of Bishops lost the collegiality of the whole episcopal body.

There is an ambiguity in how the bishops relate to the General Synod, in that the Church is 'episcopally led and synodically governed'. In the report, *Working as One Body*, which led to the establishment of the Archbishop's Council, the role of the bishops was stronger:

⁵¹ R Bursell, 'The Oath of Canonical Obedience' (2014) 16 Ecc LJ 168–186.

⁵² See <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/governance/general-synod/structure/house-bishops> (accessed 25 August 2025).

⁵³ General Synod Measure 1969, Sch 2.

⁵⁴ *Minutes from a meeting of the House of Bishops*, 11 March 2025, §5.

The House of Bishops would exercise its leadership by developing, with the assistance of the Council, a vision for the broad direction of the Church, offering it for debate in the General Synod and the Church as a whole. This vision would in turn influence the work of the Council, which would seek the guidance of the House of Bishops on its overall plan and strategy and then present them to the General Synod for endorsement. Building on the model of the Bishop-in-Synod, this would allow the bishops collectively to offer leadership to the Church, while also taking counsel and seeking consent.⁵⁵

This report assumes that the diocesan bishops would together as a body work out a vision for the Church, and guide the Council but in practice, it has been the archbishops and their hold on the money in the Archbishop's Council, which has driven everything, and without money, the dispersed authority of the diocesan bishop counts for little. Moreover, the new Governance Review will directly subsume the bishops under the Church of England National Services (CENS). A small group will be allowed under the archbishop to develop 'a set of guiding visionary principles' but how those are to be embodied in strategy will not, as in the Turnbull report, be under the guidance of the House of Bishops but the responsibility of the new central CENS body.⁵⁶

This bears upon the question of the nature of episcopal authority. It was precisely because the Nicæan bishops were agents in a hierarchy to engender the salvation and deification of the faithful that they required right belief. They worked as both a local college and as independent bishops, in communion with the other bishops and with their own people, clerical and lay. Our polity in practice has quite lost the centrality of the hierarchical, although it still exists in the ancient eastern churches, such as the Coptic, in which any bishop, and even the Coptic pope, will sit in his cathedra regularly to give spiritual advice to anyone who seeks it, or reconcile disputants. Our bench of bishops is expected to act more as a group of middle managers, with a raft of administrative tasks. They act as a college only in following central directions. Charlotte Gauthier, writing as a former middle manager herself, opines that:

Effective middle managers act in the same way a transmission does in an automobile, driving power from the engine to the wheels. But adding more and more transmissions to a car won't help get you anywhere if the engine is choked – or dead. Middle managers translate vision into the strategy and tactics that will turn things written on paper into a reality in the world. They are useless – or worse, destructive – in the absence of a clear vision, and can never compensate for its lack.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Working as One Body: The Report of the Archbishop's Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England* (London, 1995), 4.11, 40.

⁵⁶ National Church Governance Report GS2307 (London, 2023), 18a, 21.

⁵⁷ Charlotte Gauthier, 'Middle-management malaise', <https://allthingslawfulandhonest.wordpress.com/2021/02/13/middle-management-malaise/> (accessed 25 August 2025).

Although the Governance Review documents speak about vision, they mean something much more limited, as a few achievable goals. Without a proper theological vision of what the Church is about, the bishops become mere functionaries, while their management role takes them away from the very people they are supposed to shepherd, teach and raise to union with God.

Paradoxically, as the bishops' role in central Church decision-making is lessened, roles and practices which distance the bishop from the laity proliferate, so that in a Church so much smaller than formerly, we yet need extra associate archdeacons and suffragan bishops. We end up with a top-heavy polity, driven from the centre, with numbers of administrators in diocesan offices not even truly diocesan but provided by central funding for discrete mission projects. These come with a raft of project managers and mission enablers, and skew the ecology of the local body. As the Bishop of Rochester told his diocesan synod 'the renewed and strengthened emphasis on [the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment Board] and the Diocesan Investment Programme, with resources going only to special projects approved by the Board, further exacerbates the sense of control by the centre', while the Bishop of Hereford speaking of this same programme said 'at the moment, all the control of that vast amount of cash is from a very small group of people ... I just don't feel comfortable with that. We should be trusted'.⁵⁸

All the decisions about funding are taken by small central bodies, like the Triennium Funding Group and the Archbishop's Council and to their credit they are giving increased funding through the Lowest Income Communities Fund (LICF) to poor parishes, but even here the money might not be spent on parish priests since this too must be 'missional'. With the advent of CENS, which will replace the Archbishop's Council, this centripetal model will be even stronger, and the role of the bishops even further lessened in authority. The loss of the bishop as primarily a spiritual, theological and pedagogical role as in the hierarchical model also disenfranchises the clergy and laity. Everything in the way a diocese works vitiates against an intimacy with a parishioner's local bishop and Save the Parish have supported Parochial Church Councils who sometimes wait months before receiving a reply to a letter to their bishop, if at all. In many dioceses there is not even a direct email for the bishop, whereas all staff have access to that of the vice-chancellor of a university, which is so much larger. Paradoxically, returning to a more ancient mode of episcopacy would rebalance power relations in the Church and enable every level to flourish.

Charlotte Gauthier points the way in her article:

Fortunately, there is an alternative vision available – a clear, compelling vision with which the majority already agree. It is simply this: A Christian presence in every community.

⁵⁸ 'Bishop of Rochester questions Church Commissioners' control over dioceses', *The Church Times*, 17 March 2025: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/21-march/news/uk/bishop-of-rochester-questions-church-commissioners-control-over-dioceses> (accessed 25 August 2025). See also note 19, above.

Six words. And that's all you need. Everything else – Church structures, funding, training, and all the rest – can neatly fall in line behind it, if we have the courage to drop the insulating and responsibility-shunning layers of management twaddle and commit to something so simple, pure, and holy.⁵⁹

If we put the local front and foremost, the places where the laity work and worship, this would not result in some closed-in bad parochialism, but a confidence that would build a commitment to the flourishing of the whole, which depends on this. For in the ancient Church before the word diocese came into use the area of the bishop's jurisdiction was his *paroichia*, his parishes. Without their flourishing, no level can flourish. As Dionysius taught, the perfection of bishops, clergy and people is mutually constitutive. There is room here for experiment and innovation, to reaching out to people in mission wherever we find them but always organically connected to stable parochial structures.

Moreover, choosing a bishop by acclamation but also with the consent of neighbouring bishops and metropolitan, could not be worse than our present broken system and would tie the bishop more closely to his or her people. The whole procedure of a public election would itself be educative. Other Anglican churches manage a more participatory election and episcopate. Our synodical structures have become too much like interest groups, so that a gathering of everyone to present candidates, hear testimonies about them and vote would be much more democratic and establish a closer relationship to the bishop from the outset of his or her episcopate.

As with the ecumenical council, subsidiarity does not mean everything is best done locally: let us centralise much of our administrative work, to free up bishops for a more creative and sustainable pastoral and teaching ministry. Let their training and that of the whole Church, clerical and lay, be more deeply biblical, theological and prayerful, so that our common life becomes richer and deeper to enable a truly dynamic hierarchy. We will not all agree; disagreements will rage and there will be a need for councils to determine doctrine, not least in the field of same-sex relations, but let these be led by bishops and addressed by academic theologians, of whom there are blessedly a number among the faithful, but who are too often ignored. I hope we will not witness a St Nicholas striking Arius as in the Nicæan legend or mobs rampaging. But in the model I am describing, these debates will go much more deeply and philosophically into the subject than the rather superficial level of argument that presently obtains, to examine first principles and modes of hermeneutics.

Conclusion

With our present managerialism and lack of faith in our own charism, no wonder we have a crisis in vocations to ordained ministry at the point where a well-trained, theologically literate and liturgically skilled clergy is essential to the survival of the

⁵⁹ Gaultier (note 57).

Church of England. Our laity, particularly in the Anglican heartlands of the country and small towns, feel lost and abandoned and starved of the eucharist. We are a long way from Ignatius's ecclesial orchestra. Yet the good-will and the commitment of bishops, clergy and laity could be unified and directed to the flourishing of the Church and gospel if we abandoned centralised, stratified and stifling bureaucratic modes of behaviour for a polity in which bishops could be both more collegial and yet locally connected in what Cyprian describes as 'this sacrament of unity, this bond of concord inseparably cohering' in which we behave as the truly 'supernatural society' that Hooker believes us to be, rather than a declining Wilko.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (note 4), 421–29, at #7, 423; Hooker (note 23), I, xv, 2 at 1, 217.