Leadership in the Church: Aristotelian Ethical Considerations

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In 1983, the new Code of Canon Law was promulgated and among its provisions was the obligation for parishes to have a Parish Finance Committee. In a New South Wales country diocese, a parish priest failed for sometime to constitute a committee, and eventually the bishop simply insisted that he do so by a certain deadline. The parish priest, who had ruled supreme in his domain with little opposition for many years, thought about this and soon rang a select group of parishioners, all of them ‘old mates’. He told each that the bishop had insisted that he form a Parish Finance Committee and asked whether he would be prepared to be on that committee. Each agreed to do so and then asked when the first meeting would be. To each the parish priest said, ‘Oh! I don’t want any meetings. I just need a committee.’

In the course of events, this particular incident was not very damaging, but nor can we accept that the state of affairs so described was good. There was something seriously wrong with the way in which the parish was functioning and with the way in which the parish priest exercised his governance of the parish community and its affairs. The manner in which the story circulated indicates that, although nobody was outraged, they nevertheless thought that the state of affairs was very odd. In response to more serious frustrations among members of the church we frequently hear calls for institutional change in the Church.

My intention in this article is to make use of Aristotelian political thought in order both to cast light on some of the practices in the church that trouble us and to suggest ways in which Aristotle’s thought might illumine the work of theologians as they wrestle with issues of governance in the church. This project is, indeed, about ethics, because it deals with the action of those people in the community who exercise leadership, rule or governance and with the possibilities of participation offered to the whole community through the structures and institutions that coordinate the action of the whole. For Aristotle, politics is an extension of ethics in so far as it provides the conditions in which ethical life can be nourished.

The article will be in three parts. The first will briefly examine some of the talk that we hear about the political shape of the church. The second will turn more directly towards political philosophy and outline the fundamentals of what can be called an Aristotelian politic. The third will apply these to the issues that arise within the church.

Before I proceed, I wish to make two disclaimers. First, I am writing from the point of view of political philosophy, which cannot fully explain the church, for which we have to turn to theology. Secondly, I will not investigate the actions of particular persons, even though it could strengthen the argument to do so.

Use of Political Language about the Church

Although there is often reserve about using political language about the church, we do not really have to go far to find it. It may be helpful to recall some incidents, all towards the end of 2004, in which questions were raised about the political form of the church in public discussion.

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1 This article is developed from a lecture that was first given on 14 September 2005 as the seventh lecture in a series of Jubilee Lectures recognising sixty years of service by the Aquinas Academy in Sydney. It was published in an earlier version in the collection of those lectures: Michael Whelan (ed), Issues for Church and Society in Australia: The Aquinas Academy Jubilee Lectures (Strathfield, St Pauls, 2005), Chapter 7, pp. 122 – 140.

2 See Nicomachean Ethics X, 9.


4 In so far as the church is monarchical, criticism of its leaders has dimensions that are not so clearly present in robust democracies. In a monarchy, the monarch carries the identity of the community in his or her person. To attack the person is in some respects to attack the community.
An article in *The Age* claimed that two Melbourne priests had called the church’s leadership dictatorial, remote and lacking in compassion. Their outburst was immediately prompted by changes introduced in the Archdiocese, but in the longer term they felt that they had been subject to ‘a backlash against Vatican II’. In a statement, the Vicar-General said that their views were not held universally and that ‘there may be a question of a personal agenda which they feel frustrated over’. In Brisbane, *The Courier-Mail* reported a priest saying the following during a liturgical dispute that had become public. ‘The underlying thing is that the church, which is not a democracy, is having trouble relating to democracy. The traditional Catholic thing is that all wisdom comes down from above, but we Catholics live in a democratic society.’

About the same time, a report appeared in *Online Catholics* about a Diocesan Assembly in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. At the opening of the Assembly, Bishop Michael Malone said, ‘We are far from perfect here in Maitland-Newcastle, but over the years we have made substantial progress towards becoming a more inclusive and collaborative Church. Perhaps at times we have taken two steps forward and one step back, but we can pride ourselves on going somewhere together.’

In the first, the priests applied negative political terms to the way in which leadership is exercised. They were dismissed by a spokesman as feeling frustrated. Indeed they were, and perhaps they spoke intemperately, but more needs to be said, as there might have been some grounds for this. These kinds of outburst indicate pressure in the system, and they need to be taken seriously.

In the second, a new issue is raised, namely a disjunction between the way in which the church operates and the way that people have learnt to live in a democratic society. What is at stake here is a difference of culture.

In the third, we find an acknowledgement of lack of perfection yet use of terms like ‘inclusive’ and ‘collaborative’ and the fact of people in the church coming together to work on problems and futures together. Bishop Malone said further, ‘A Diocesan Assembly is an opportunity for the people of the diocese to come together to listen to one another and together map a direction for the diocese for at least the next five years.’

### What is the Church Politically?

It is worth attempting an initial statement about what the church is politically. Michael Oakeshott’s definition of politics is helpful. ‘Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community.’ At stake are the constitutional or structural arrangements that allow the church to function as it does. It is clear from the Second Vatican Council’s *Lumen Gentium* (LG), that the church does indeed think of itself from this aspect, especially in relation to the kingly function. ‘The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people.’ *(LG 10)* ‘Bishops, therefore, with their helpers, the priests and deacons, have taken up the service of the community, presiding in place of God over the flock, whose shepherds they are, as teachers for doctrine, priests for sacred worship, and ministers for governing.’ *(LG 20)*

The term usually used to describe the structure of the church is ‘hierarchy’. In an ordinary sense, this means ‘a system in which grades or classes of authority are ranked one above the other’. When we look more closely, we see that the church appears in three ways. When the pope is viewed directly, it appears as an absolute monarchy. *(LG 18)* When it is a question of the bishops working together with the pope, it appears as a monarchy with an active nobility or aristocracy. *(LG 22 – 23)* When bishops are considered in their own right and with authority in their own dioceses, it appears as a tiered monarchy. *(LG 27)* It is clearly, then, a complex entity in which tensions calling for adjustment are likely to arise.

### Aristotle – Political Life and its Structure

We turn now to a consideration of Aristotle’s political thought found mainly in his *Politics*.  

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5 *The Age* 22 December 2004.


12 I will use the edition of Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Aristotle’s political thought is also found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*.
The main tenets of his polit can be gathered under six headings. He will not provide direct answers to our questions but rather a way of thinking that will help us find answers.

The Fundamental Distinction and Political Problem

Aristotle begins his Politics with a discussion of the emergence of different forms of human life. Most basic is the family life that takes place in a household in which daily needs are met and which is built on the relationships of husband and wife and of master and servants. Village life is for the sake of something more than daily needs and composed of a number of households, often with relationships of blood. These are natural communities and exist everywhere. The achievement that fascinates Aristotle is the move to political life that is found in a city or, we might say, a country. It is composed of a number of villages and of people who are not related by blood and so its activities are public. The point about a political community is that it is founded not just for life but for the sake of living well. Its members use their reason in order to participate in the decisions affecting them and in order to seek a way of life that can be called best. With material necessities secured, citizens are able to strive for human perfection in speech, thought and action.

The second part of Aristotle’s first book deals with the management of the household or economics. It is based on the relationship between master and servant. It is often regarded as shocking, because Aristotle justifies what he calls natural slavery, but it plays a crucial role in his thought. Natural servants are capable of using their bodies to work but participate in reason only to the extent that they can recognise commands. The naturally free are those with qualities of soul and mind enabling them to exercise foresight, to command and to rule. The relationship between master and servant is built around the satisfaction of material necessities and is mutually beneficial but not equal.

The point of this discussion is that two forms of life are recognised: economic life, in which daily necessities are won, and political life, in which people who are free and equal participate in the affairs of the community. Similarly two forms of rule are recognised: rule of master over servants and rule of statesmen over citizens. This is the fundamental distinction of the Politics. It is worked out in Book I but pervades the whole of the Politics. Aristotle realises that there is a constant tendency for political rule to lapse back into the form of mastery of servants. He defines despotism as the exercise of mastery in the political realm. What is fundamental, however, is his notion of a political life in which every person who is recognised as part of the political community is able to exercise his or her abilities to the best degree possible. This primarily means being able to participate in those discussions and decisions that affect the welfare of the community and its future and to act virtuously in the company of fellow citizens.

In the light of this distinction, the political problem becomes clear. How can the life of the community be so organised that every member is able to participate in ways appropriate to his or her abilities and means?

Possible Political Forms

In order to resolve this problem, Aristotle examines the various political forms that are possible. Unlike modern philosophers, he does not lay down one particular idea about the shape of the political community, but rather makes a formal analysis of the kinds that are available, and then uses these in an examination of the various political arrangements that had been achieved in the Greek world. He distinguishes correct constitutions, under which rulers act for the good of the citizens, and deviant constitutions, under which rulers act for the sake of their own good. There are three of each, distinguished on the basis of who rules.

Of the correct forms, kingship is the rule of one person for the common good; aristocracy is the rule of the few, who are virtuous, for the sake of the community as a whole; polity or republicanism is the rule of the many for the sake of the community. Of the deviant forms, tyranny is the rule of one person for his own advantage; oligarchy is the rule of the few following their own interests; democracy is the rule of the many seeking their own advantage. While oligarchies can be formed on the basis of wealth, birth or historical opportunity, it turns out that the wealthy are always few and the poor always many and that the key

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13 Politics I, 1–2.
15 Politics I, 3–7. Although Aristotle uses the term ‘slave’, a better translation for our times is ‘servant’, particularly because our sensitivities towards the alienating modes of slavery that arose in modern times.
16 Aristotle calls on this distinction in all the books of the Politics except Book VIII. Mary P. Nichols also picks up the theme in her commentary, Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle’s Politics (Savage MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), esp. pp. 13–51.
17 Politics III, 6–8.
distinction between parts of the city is between the wealthy and the poor. Oligarchy thus amounts to the rule of the wealthy and democracy to the rule of the poor. The former look to wealth; the latter, to freedom.

When Aristotle examines actual constitutions, it turns out that none fit a pure form; they are usually mixed constitutions that blend elements of each of the pure forms. This is not only an empirical finding but also a necessity, if the life of a political community is to be successful. The reason for this is that in any community there will always be people of different kinds. The kinds can be distinguished, for instance, according to skill or to wealth or to intellectual ability. [7] Farmers, fishermen, artisans and nobles are each going to be able to participate in different ways. The solution to the problem of how such different people can effectively participate will call for a mixed form of constitution. In fact, pure forms are likely to be deviant. A pure monarchy is more than likely to lapse into tyranny. Unfettered rule of the masses is likely to lead to extinction of the talented.

The blending of constitutions takes place through the various offices and institutions that assist the community to function. This is a matter of the kinds of officials, of the modes of assembly and of the various courts that oversee the law. Distinction can be made between eligibility for office and eligibility to vote a person into office. For instance, eligibility could be on the basis of merit (aristocratic) but election on the basis of citizenship (democratic). Different institutions may be composed of different parts of the community. An interesting case is when the rich are given control of spending for the community, because they know how to use money; while the poor are given the power of audit, because they will be most jealous to ensure that the benefits of spending are fairly distributed. [8]

Four Senses of the Best

In seeking to understand what is the best that a political community could achieve, Aristotle distinguishes four senses of the best constitution. [9] The first is the constitution ‘one would pray for above all’. [10] It is dependent on adequate circumstances and is the rule of only the virtuous – a pure aristocracy, which Aristotle acknowledges is unattainable for more than a moment. [11] The second is the constitution that is the most fitting and best practicable for all communities as such. For Aristotle, it is the balanced republic – a blend of democracy and oligarchy, which acknowledges the need to balance otherwise deviant forms. [12] The third is the constitution that is best for a particular community in its own particular circumstances. The fourth is the constitution that is best when faced with an existing community and its presuppositions, in particular, the kind of constitution that it already has. In this, he recognises that a community does not have absolute beginnings but always has to deal with its history and pre-political conditions.

Conditions Contributing to Political Possibilities

It may be that a community can be founded but that the possibilities for flourishing will always be limited by the material conditions of its people and territory. In assessing the possibilities of any particular community to achieve a life that might be called ‘best’ these factors have to be taken into account. They include things like the character of the people themselves, the disposition and resources of the territory in which they live, the history that has brought them to their present condition, and the economic possibilities of their community. If, for example, a people has been long accustomed to despotic rule, it is not likely that they will quickly succeed in moving to the best practicable form of government. [13]

What this shows is that the particular form of a community is not determined in the abstract by a philosopher. It is rather the achievement of practical people who gradually put institutions in place. What they can do is limited by the geography, culture, history and available resources of the people and their territory.

Preserving Political Forms

Political arrangements are never static, and Aristotle was very aware of the possibilities of revolution, generally due to grievances that had their roots in misbehaviour of a regime or in injustice of one kind or another. [14] Constitutions are preserved not [8] by attempting to hold fast to the present arrangements but by constantly moving towards what is better. This will often involve moving away from the pure constitutional form. Kingships, for instance, are preserved by becoming

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18 Politics VI, 4.
19 Politics IV, 1 – 2.
20 Politics IV, 1 (1288b22).
21 Politics VII.
22 Politics IV, 11.
23 Politics VII, 4 – 7.
24 Modern written constitutions give the appearance of long term stability, but within those boundaries there is constant reform, for instance, of public service arrangements or of industrial relations, and the constant tendency of one group in society, such as the rich or the poor, to gain ascendancy and to shift arrangements in their favour.
more moderate in their exercise of authority. Aristotle also offers general rules for all regimes, such as choosing only people who are fit for office, not neglecting the least powerful elements of the community and educating people to live under the constitution.\textsuperscript{25}

**Possibilities for Failure**

In the light of what we have seen, there are three general ways in which political life fails. Despotic rule occurs when mastery of servants is taken into the political realm. In a real sense, mastery is part of life, and can be found, for instance, in modern corporations, in which employees are not expected to deliberate about how to achieve what is best, but it does not belong to that aspect of life in which people hope to excel.\textsuperscript{26} A tyrant looks to private gain and to pleasure. What he does is for his own sake not that of the community. Tyrants are always hated and rely on strength to achieve what they want.\textsuperscript{27} Dictatorship is rule that rejects the ‘rule of law’. The notion of the ‘rule of law’ is that everybody, including those who govern, is subject to a law, which is public and stable. Dictators reject this and promulgate orders that do not respect the standing law.\textsuperscript{28}

**Application to the Church**

This final section will apply the Aristotelian thought that we have just examined to the kinds of issues that were raised in the first section. It will look at both the problems that we face and how the church might function well. It will also need to find a more suitable terminology than that of Aristotelian politics.

**The Failures that Trouble Us**

The failures that trouble us in the church, insofar as they constitute a manner of acting rather than a simple failure to act, are similar to those that have just been examined. The point of looking at failure first is that it is obvious to most whereas envisaging what is best takes a considerable act of imagination. As we have noted previously, the failures are ethical failures. The question is what form might they take in the church?

Despotic rule may be directed towards the good of the community, but it is not participatory. People are simply told what to do. The goal is not to facilitate responsible human action but rather to achieve some organisational end. A sign of despotic rule is the failure to institute the relevant councils or committees or to run them in a way such that real deliberation takes place. Despotism may be benign or malignant. A benign despot often manages well and may be loving and dedicated, but gives the people in the church no room to exercise their higher gifts. The priest in the story at the beginning is an example. A malign despot appears to be working for a church that is not identical with all the people currently in it. People are regarded as mere tools and can be manipulated or ordered about with little thought for their human dignity. It is common that good people are ground down. We can find out about instances of bishops exercising this kind of rule by listening to the stories of priests as they recount their experiences, which display the manner of their debasement.

Tyrannical rule implies that the life of the community is directed to the ends of the ruler rather than of the community. In the life of a state, this usually means that the ruler accumulates wealth and luxury for himself. In the church, while money and the instruments of power may be at issue, it more likely means that a bishop or priest directs all action according to a personal agenda, or in favour of some small group within the church. It is, therefore, anything other than catholic. It is interesting to see in Aristotle how tyrants behave. They use spies or informers (delation) rather than engage in open dialogue. They are also without compunction in the use of force, and they are generally strong. It is characteristic of a tyrant to seek company among outsiders and to bring bodyguards and lieutenants in from outside the community.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, tyrants are not

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\item \textsuperscript{25} *Politics* V, 10 – 11.
\item \textsuperscript{26} *Politics* III, 6 – 8. John Locke recognised this when he said ‘a freeman makes himself a servant to another, by selling him, for a certain time, the service he undertakes to do, in exchange for the wages he is to receive’. (Second Treatise, Chapter VII, n. 85.)
\item \textsuperscript{27} *Politics* V, 11. Despotism and tyranny differ further in that despotism is a failure to achieve political life while tyranny is the collapse of the same.
\item \textsuperscript{28} *Politics* III, 14 – 18. Sometimes ‘emergency powers’ are invoked to deal with a particular crisis and are legitimate. They constitute a kind of temporary dictatorship. Persisted in, they subject every person to the whim of the dictator.
\item \textsuperscript{29} In *Politics* V, 11, Aristotle gives a lot more detail under the rubric of how tyrants preserve their rule, though he is much against tyrants. It is interesting to note that in *The Prince* Machiavelli proposes much the same actions but as a guide to how a prince should act. A fuller list of practices noted by Aristotle could be easily compared with Machiavelli’s proposals: Lop off the pre-eminent and those with high thoughts. Guard against thought and trust among the people. Use spies so that people cannot speak freely. Set the people against one another by slander. Ensure that they have to work so hard that they have no leisure.
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leaders of communities; they rather use communities instrumentally for their own ends.

Dictatorship is rule by decree of the ruler. What is at stake here is the rule of law, which in any form or rule is a protection against the passions and whims of a ruler. A parish priest who comes new into a thriving parish and demolishes the existing structures, such as parish councils, acts in this way. It is a weakness of church law that this can happen, but it could be rectified by diocesan law and by protective devices. Deviant forms unfortunately block the power of the master to the degree

Dictatorship ‘participation’ (Conzelmann). ‘As for the cup of (Good News), ‘partnership’ (Anchor), is variously translated ‘communion’ (JB), ‘sharing’ of participation. In 1 Corinthians 10: 16, koinonia. It can mean simply ‘community’, but as communion or communio it carries a sense of participation. In 1 Corinthians 10: 16, koinonia is variously translated ‘communion’ (JB), ‘sharing’ (Good News), ‘partnership’ (Anchor), ‘participation’ (Conzelmann). ‘As for the cup of

A Servile Church
When referring to systematic failures of leadership in the church, it may be better to talk about a servile church. It is a timeless human problem that those in charge want to manage the activities of those whom they would better lead. (In Aristotle’s view, despotism is more persistent than tyranny.) Jesus spoke to his disciples about this after his exchange with the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

You know that among the pagans the rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant; and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for man. (Matt 20: 25 – 28)

Here, Jesus explicitly overturned the order of despotic rule in his time. It is often misinterpreted, so that ‘I am your servant’, becomes a mantra for unreflective rule.31 The kind of rule implied for the ordering of the Christian community is found in John 15: 15.

I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master’s business; I call you friends,

Cultivate base people, who delight in being flattered. Seek more company among foreigners, who are not rivals, than people of the city. In general, ensure that the population, especially those who are capable, have only modest thoughts, are not able to act, and distrust one another.

31 Pope John Paul II also promoted a ‘spirituality of communion’ as part of his plan for the new millennium. Novo Millennio Ineunte nn. 43 – 45.
32 Edmund Bourke is alert to this and says, ‘Servants don’t like to be told that that is what they are.’ Reflections on the Revolution in France (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 114.
because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.

The notion of friends links both to the scriptural understanding of communion and to Aristotle’s understanding of political life in which the city is bound by affection (*philia*). There is energy in a community that can live this way. In a servile church, life is truncated, and people are either subdued or they go elsewhere.

**How Should the Church Function?**

The lessons we learnt from Aristotle can also be translated into ecclesial language. The following sentences constitute an attempt to reformulate the central thought of each of the six sections of our discussion of Aristotle in language more conducive to theological reflection.

Foster communion for all members of the church as a life of full participation in the person of Christ and in the activities of the community.

Engage with the ecclesial problem of finding the most effective ways in which all can participate to the greatest degree possible.

Recognise the structure of the church not as a pure form but as mixed, balancing the differences in the community in ways that are appropriate to persons and to the whole.

Be constantly vigilant, so that a life that can be called good is preserved and so that there is constant movement towards what is best.

Work with various senses of what is best. The scriptures present a high ideal (*Acts of [11] the Apostles*), but we have also to deal with the possibilities of a particular community and time.

Be patient, because a community’s manner of acting is affected by its history and carried in a culture, and so significant change will generally be slow and hesitant.

These same issues exist at different levels: the bishops acting as a college; the relationship between local bishops and the Roman curia; the operation of bishops’ conferences; the life of a diocese; the life of a parish.

The Second Vatican Council clearly proposed a church in which there was a greater level of participation than was then common practice. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 37, for instance, is at once adventurous and hesitant in opening up new possibilities for the laity. The language is largely scriptural and presents a noble vision, but it also protects the status quo with sentences that seem simply to stand in opposition to one another. What Aristotelian political thinking can offer in this situation is a means of more complex articulation of the arrangements necessary, if the church is to function well. The difficulty is in the detail, and what this article proposes is that if the church is to find ways of living in communion rather than simply being a servile church, it could well call on philosophical imagination stimulated by Aristotelian politics to find ways in which communion can be achieved across the whole church.

We are not without a starting point. The canon lawyer, James Provost, has suggested three areas in which current church law allows room for development: decision making, selection of leaders and accountability. Decision making can be shared through parish and diocesan assemblies or synods, and much has been learnt about how to do this effectively. Much better methods of consultation in the appointment of bishops could be developed so as to engage the knowledge and capacity of the faithful. There have been initial attempts towards accountability, particularly in the area of finance, but they have been limited. Church leaders are accountable for their actions only in limited ways, usually through higher intervention and generally in crises. Much better forms of accountability could readily be instituted.

**Conclusion**

The church is much more than an institution of human foundation. It is founded by Christ and sustained by the Spirit. Nevertheless, much that it does and the way in which it develops is of human origin. As a large organisation of human beings it does take on political forms. These can be to its good or to its detriment, and so the kind of thinking in which we have engaged in this article is aimed at continual clarification of the goods that we seek and the best ways to achieve them.

The calls for change in the church are often borne of pain and frustration. The Council offered the hope of greater participation for all members of the church. This has not been fulfilled in many places; in others it is slow and faltering. At times, there are church leaders who exercise rule in ways that are simply wrong. What this article offers is a way of thinking the issues through and of finding ways in which things can be rectified. An Aristotelian political will stimulate theologians and church leaders to imagine possibilities for change, which, although often small in themselves, will generate significant improvement in the way we live.

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