

## SEEKING EFFICIENT CHURCH STRUCTURES: RESISTING BUREAUCRATIC CREEP

When you hear the word **bureaucracy**, what image is conjured up in your mind? Does the term have a positive or negative **connotation** for you? It is a peculiar word, one that did not ring any immediate bells in my mind regarding its derivation. So, I looked it up, learning that it is a combination of the **French** word **bureau** (i.e. a desk) with the **Greek** word **κράτος** (kratos) meaning **strength or power**. In Greek mythology, Kratos was the god of strength and power. A literal description of a bureaucracy might be a “powerful rule emanating from a desk.” Any negative connotation is more understandable because if people sense they have essentially unbridled power, effectively unanswerable to others, they could simply rule from behind a desk. The tendency towards bureaucratic creep is hardly limited to the Church, though we are particularly vulnerable. Why do we continue to maintain structures when the evidence points in a very different direction? My experience last week drove that point home.

When making a suggestion about the newly launched **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops** (USCCB) website, I searched awhile before finding any contact information. When I finally found it, the online form required me to check boxes in a photo, ostensibly to prove I was not a robot. Then I waited....and waited. This was not the first time—I still haven’t heard back. Incorporated under U.S. civil law, the USCCB is a network of offices and allied organizations that assist the Catholic bishops in their ministry. **Episcopal Conferences** provide a collective voice for groups of bishops united by nationality or geography. Theologically and juridically though, each individual bishop is the **chief teacher** in his diocese. The USCCB is “an assembly of the hierarchy of bishops who jointly exercise pastoral functions on behalf of the Christian faithful of the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands.” So far, so good.

Its stated mission is to “support the ministry of bishops with an emphasis on evangelization, by which the bishops exercise in a communal and collegial manner certain pastoral functions entrusted to them by the Lord Jesus of sanctifying, teaching, and governing (see *Lumen Gentium*, no. 21).” The USCCB website boasts a treasure trove of resources and background information that help inform a pastor’s preaching and teaching, of which I have availed myself. Comprised of **6 distinct administrative offices** supporting **18 committees**, it deals with a bevy of theological and pastoral issues in the Church today. Just how these align with the issues unique to Catholics in Des Moines, Boise or Brooklyn is debatable. This is neither surprising nor necessarily problematic, but when organizations **expand** without careful oversight, they can grow out of control.

The USCCB operating budget is derived partially from diocesan assessments, estimated at \$12 million in 2019. In turn, dioceses derive much of their annual income from parish assessments. With 194 Catholic (Arch)dioceses and eparchies (Eastern Catholic dioceses), that is an **average assessment of \$61,855** per diocese, adjusted according to the size of the diocese. That ain’t exactly chump change! Additionally, many dioceses contribute a **similar amount** annually to the Holy See (though not required by Church Law) for its upkeep. The USCCB serves as a logical conduit for various national collections that support our retired religious, disaster relief, etc. and oversees migration and refugee services and policy advocacy. These are rightly described as **necessary coordinating services** that they provide. To what extent has the USCCB become yet another bureaucracy?

Consider that while many dioceses were in the midst of prolonged bankruptcy proceedings (thankfully ours are over), last November by a **vote of 130-62** (plus 3 abstentions) the bishops approved a 3% increase in **diocesan assessments**. (Read: **your** money!) They needed exactly 130 votes for the measure to pass. The USCCB **employs approximately 300 people**— more than the total number of active bishops. Does that make sense? Are there lessons here? For example, the Diocese of Fairbanks is simultaneously the largest (by area: 410,000 sq. miles) and smallest (by Catholic population: 12,475 souls) in the nation. Understandably, the diocese faces its own unique issues and challenges. You may recall this when Bishop Zielinski visited us as our missionary speaker. Your generosity to his diocese was exemplary! But the offices of the USCCB must appear as a behemoth located in a different world to the faithful in AK. If this disconnect extends to a majority of the clergy, religious and faithful, the time is ripe to re-think our structures. The long-term health of the Church requires it.

We in the Church are neither unique, nor should we be immune from valid critiques of our organizational structures. Many non-profit organizations relying on outside financial support experience this tension. By contrast, businesses must react to market fluctuations or face sure failure. Has the USCCB grown too large to be subject to scrutiny from bishops who are often up to their eyeballs in their own diocesan issues? I was astonished to read in the annual report that the USCCB holds **\$263 million** in long-term investments, the income from which supports operations. Covid-19 has forced many companies to make significant adjustments. Should the Church be any different? I **sincerely desire** for the USCCB to be both **effective and efficient**. May I offer this suggestion? The U.S. Bishops should solicit input from the faithful laity (clergy too?) concerning **measurable outcomes** and an **honest assessment** of how the USCCB is **perceived** by the faithful in the pews. It could prove to be most enlightening.

- While there are challenges, Catholic schools stand to **gain substantive enrollment** with their decision to resume **in-school classes** to the highest extent possible. Large urban school districts have eschewed in-person classes and that is not sitting well with many parents. I was truly impressed with one local K-12 Catholic school's comprehensive back-to-school plan, as it factored in many variables and anticipates contingencies. Having taught classes for more than a decade, there is no substitute for in-person learning!
- Cincinnati's **Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains** (interesting name!) was elevated to the rank of a **minor basilica** by Pope Francis. It is a beautiful church in the basilica style (all the more appropriate), boasting beautiful murals and has the distinction of being the nation's oldest Cathedral (175 years) still in continuous use. Congratulations.
- As a follow-up to my recent column on the **harsh reality** of money and college sports, note that the NBA is just now beginning its 2019-2020 season playoffs, the **Kentucky Derby** run for the roses is in September and the **Masters** Golf Tournament tees off in November. Have we lost our minds? Perhaps, but I could name plenty of folks who have lost much of what fills their coffers.
- A new film entitled **"Fatima"** is finally set for release on August 28 after a Covid-related delay. Check out [www.fatimathemovie.com](http://www.fatimathemovie.com) for on-demand and theater information. It includes an original song performed by Italian virtuoso **Andrea Bocelli**. Though the actors are mostly foreign, the film's original language is in English. I encourage you to check it out.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector