The Papacy and the People of God, edited by Gary MacEoin

reviewed by Tom Keene in the September 9, 1998 issue

Edited by Gary MacEoin, The Papacy and the People of God. *(Orbis, 176 pp.)*

The church began as a community of believers who looked out for one another's survival. But to survive beyond the first generation, the community had to institutionalize itself. The gospel had to be translated from oral tradition into written text. Leaders had to be appointed, codes of conduct established. By the reign of Constantine the Great, 300 years later, the church had learned to survive with comfort. It became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

From then on, the church was preoccupied with its survival as an institution, while the idea of Christian community struggled to express itself wherever it could: in monasteries, religious orders, and small groups that risked being branded as heretical. Inquisitions, crusades and the burning of witches marked the dark pages of an institution more concerned with order and survival than the well-being of its members.

The creative tension between institution and community is a useful lens for viewing the history of the Catholic Church. Institution works to maintain control, promote survival and ensure order; community works to promote freedom, enable personal growth and develop meaning. Strong communities keep institutions healthy by reminding them that they must serve the common good, not their own concentrations of power. On the other hand, communities must have institutional elements to ensure that the rent gets paid, meals are on time and members look out for each other's well-being.

The pendulum turned back toward community when delegates to Vatican II rejected the Vatican bureaucracy's pressure to define the church as an institution or society of clergy and laity with the former in charge of the latter. Instead, the council fathers forged a gospel-grounded phrase to describe the church: the people of God. This description enabled a vision of the church as a "community of communities." Such a vision frightened church bureaucrats who considered the institution sacred, but the insights of Vatican II are too deeply rooted in the experience of the church to be

easily countered.

Gary MacEoin's book brings together thinkers and writers from Europe, Latin America, Australia and the United States. Each explores elements of community that are reshaping the church in a way that makes institution serve community. Theologian Pablo Richard poses this dynamic by contrasting the institutionalizing factor of globalization and the community force of inculturation, which he defines as a "defense of life, especially the endangered life of indigenous peoples and of nature." He sees small indigenous groups creating an inclusive universality that constitutes the root meaning of catholicity.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister, explores the structural changes necessary to make the church inclusive of women. Historian Paul Collins views the papacy's primacy, centralizing power and infallibility from a 2,000-year perspective that includes the doctrine of receptivity. "If faith in Christ and his teaching is a free act and can never be forced . . . the same principle can be applied to the Christian community; it too must give consent to doctrinal teaching." This norm of communal reception has grown since Vatican II and has particular application "in the areas of church authority and personal sexuality."

In a concluding essay, Harvey Cox examines Pope John Paul II's reference to a "new situation" regarding the "supreme vocation of the Bishop of Rome" in "striving for the unity of Christians." Cox asks, "Just what is this new situation that makes it possible to carry on a discussion among all Christians about how the pope's vocation for unity could best be carried out?"

For those who want a fresh and refreshing glimpse at how the papacy and the church can weave together the best elements of institution and community, MacEoin's book is a rewarding read.