

November 1968

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Recommended Citation

Heenan, John (1968) "The Authority of the Church," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 35 : No. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol35/iss4/5>

The Authority of the Church

Cardinal John Heenan

(The following article, published in *The Tablet*, May 18, 1968, is re-printed here with the permission of *The Tablet Publishing Co., Ltd.*, 14 Howick Place, London, S.W. 1.)

A TEXT-BOOK of Catholic theology widely used by students before the Council describes the magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church, as a guarantee that "the Pope and bishops will provide the faithful with the authentic message of revelation and tradition." It would be difficult today to find a satisfactory definition. There is no more delicate subject in contemporary theology. The ordinary magisterium of the Pope is exercised in his writings and allocutions. But today what the Pope says is by no means accepted as authoritative by all Catholic theologians. An article in the periodical *Concilium* is at least as likely to win their respect as a papal encyclical. The decline of the magisterium is one of the most significant developments in the post-conciliar Church.

THE LONELY POPE

Few Catholics publicly refuse to acknowledge the authority of the Pope. The custom is to explain away his words on the grounds that they are not really authentic — living in a closed world, he is misinformed by the

advisers who surround him. His frequent complaints against distortion of doctrine are attributed to failing health. The Pope was reported to have wept at a public audience when referring to the disloyalty of some who speak in the name of the Church. This was taken as proof that the Pope has not yet recovered from his operation. The press hinted that his resignation was imminent.

The Pope may be badly advised and physically weak but he contrives to make his voice clearly heard and more often than not he displays a deep anxiety. Constantly he returns to the theme of erroneous teaching of theology. Unfortunately, his condemnations are made in general terms. Since nobody knows which theologians are being condemned it is impossible for bishops to take any action.

The isolation of the Pope has become more evident during the last two years. This was mentioned at the Synod of Bishops last year when I spoke in the name of the hierarchy of England and Wales:

The supreme authority of the Church must find methods of clarifying Catholic teaching. We bishops are fond of talking about collegiality and the principle of subsidiarity but we must bear our burden of responsibility. All too

often, Pope Paul's is a solitary voice. As bishops we cannot simply abandon our duty as teachers of the Faith and pass it to the theologians. We must make sure that when they propose a new presentation of the doctrine — and sometimes these are excellent — they clearly and without subterfuge show that their speculations are in line with accepted doctrine.

This speech was in no way an attack on theologians. On the contrary. Earlier in the speech I had said:

Before discussing errors this Synod should say a word in praise of the many theologians who are working to present Catholic teaching in a way people can grasp. This is hard work and is not without its dangers. Nevertheless, it is work which the Church must not neglect. If we are to preach the Gospel to the men and women of our time we must use language which they find intelligible . . . But if we praise those earnestly seeking a new language for the ancient truths of Faith, what are we to say of those who admit no limit to theological speculation? Some who lack any deep formation in theology do not hesitate to write on the subject and thereby cause grave harm to souls. These writers need to be put in their place, but this should not distract us from our main task of helping genuine theologians. We propose that a commission be set up consisting of theologians representing every school of thought.

We bishops are exercising the magisterium with an unsure touch. To question brash theological opinion has become increasingly hazardous. No wise bishop courts popularity for its own sake but, if only to preserve his authority with his clergy and people,

he wants to eschew the reputation of being reactionary. Unfortunately, if a bishop criticises dangerous opinions today he is said to be of a curantist. The magisterium is thought unenlightened whenever it questions novel interpretations of Catholic doctrine.

Like "hierarchy," the word "magisterium" has acquired an unattractive flavour. This may well be because in the past the magisterium was more often used to condemn than to encourage and guide. But the value of having a magisterium recognised by thoughtful Catholics. Only last week I received a letter from a lecturer in technology. He said he was converted four years ago. He continues: "The attack on the *Ecclesia docens* (and, of course, the Blessed Sacrament) is most sinister because it is made by the enemy within the Church. It is replacing the work of the Council and replacing it with a caricature council. When I was an atheist I had a horror of *imprimatur*. . . . When I became a Catholic, I found the *imprimatur* a great help while I was yet fumbling. But I soon made the discovery that nowadays an *imprimatur* means nothing necessarily; the grossest errors and heretical teachings have received *imprimatur*s during the last few years. Most of the theologians writing today are — I say it bluntly — either conscious or unconscious enemies of the Church; they sow doubt and confusion in the minds of the faithful and in their passion for change, motivated by an abject human respect, they attack the very foundations of the Church."

RISKY THEOLOGY

New versions of old doctrines are creating the greatest problems for the

magisterium. Christology, ecclesiology, the Eucharist and ecumenism are the chief fields of innovation. Analysing the modernistic trend among Catholic writers, it seems likely that their views are polarised by an inadequate notion of ecumenism. When they suggest, for example, that Christ is present in the Eucharist more or less in the same way as in the sick, the poor and the whole flock, they probably believe that they make the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence more palatable to those outside the Church.

The Vatican Council did not countenance this kind of approach. In the Instruction on the Eucharistic Mystery which explains the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy we read:

In this sacrament Christ is present in a unique way, whole and entire, God and man, substantially and permanently. This presence of Christ under the species is called the Real Presence not in any exclusive sense as though the other forms of presence were not real but by reason of its excellence.

The report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Intercommunion (May, 1968) mentions the traditional hesitation of Anglicans to "contemplate fellowship with Roman Catholics in the Mass." A footnote refers to 28 and 31 of the Articles of Religion. The first rejects as "repugnant to the plain words of scripture" both the change of the substance of bread and wine and the reservation and worship of the Blessed Sacrament. The other declares that "the sacrifice of Masses in which it was commonly said that the priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead to have remission of pain or guilt were

blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits." Then comes a significant passage: "If, however, it appeared that Roman Catholic theology had undergone a real change at this point, as Roman Eucharistic doctrine has begun to do, it would be necessary to reassess this hesitation. *Meanwhile, the doctrinal experiments of Roman Catholic theologians in connection with Eucharistic doctrine merit the closest attention.*" (*Intercommunion Today*, p. 50. my italics.)

The Eucharist serves as a useful illustration, but ecumenism is equally relevant. *The Tablet* for 17 February 1968 reports that the rabbis of Toronto regard Fr. Gregory Baum's writings as a "break-through in Roman Catholic teaching." Fr. Baum is a kindly, warm-hearted man, a convert from an agnostic Jewish family. He is reported as saying that it is no longer right to preach the Gospel to the Jews.

The Council's Decree on Ecumenism, however, declares that ecumenism is not intended as a substitute for evangelisation:

There is clearly an essential distinction between the work of preparing and reconciling individuals who desire full communion with the Catholic Church, and the ecumenical undertaking. There is no conflict between them, for they are both the development of the admirable plan of God. (Chapter 1, section 4.)

This is, of course, understood by both Jews and Protestants. They obviously do not accept it but they recognise the Catholic claim to be the one true Church. What they rightly resent is any use of the ecumenical dialogue as a cloak for proselytism.

They respect us for making an honest statement of our convictions. "The claim of unicity," wrote Bishop Butler in *The Tablet* of May 4, "is absolutely basic to Catholicism." The bishop is one of the great theologians and ecumenists of our day. The tragedy is that popular theology is so often written by men of lesser erudition.

THE DANGERS OF THE COUNCIL

What use will students of the future find for the works of Billot, Franzelin, Bellarmine, Alphonsus, Aquinas, Ambrose or Augustine? They may be of interest only to antiquarians. Preconciliar theology is almost completely at a discount. I often wonder what Pope John would have thought had he been able to foresee that his Council would provide an excuse for rejecting so much of the Catholic doctrine which he whole-heartedly accepted. Pope Paul may have had this in mind when on 3 April this year he spoke to an international audience largely composed of students:

The word of Christ is no longer the truth which never changes, ever living, radiant and fruitful, even though at times beyond our understanding. It becomes a partial truth... and is thus deprived of all objective validity and transcendent authority. It will be said that the Council authorised such treatment of traditional teaching. Nothing is more false, if we are to accept the work of Pope John who launched that *aggiornamento* in whose name some dare to impose on Catholic dogma dangerous and sometimes reckless interpretations.

The Pope did not specify what are these dangerous and reckless interpretations. It is not papal custom

to do so on such occasions. Before the Council it was the duty of the Holy Office to inform the bishops of deviations in theological writing. But the Holy Office became so unpopular during the Council that subsequently even its name was changed. Yet without guidance from the Holy See it is virtually impossible for diocesan bishops to condemn risky theology. They authorise publication of books in their own dioceses but they are not in a position to evaluate new theological views. That is the task of the supreme authority of the Church.

Meanwhile the magisterium languishes, because if the Holy See were to condemn every dangerous piece of current writing its authority would disappear in a cloud of anathemas. Traditionally the Church allows opinion to mature before expressing approval or condemnation of theological speculations. The Church will not be able to give final verdicts on the theology arising from the Second Vatican Council much before the end of the century. The deeper meaning of the Council's teaching will appear only after full study of what preceded the promulgation of the Council's decrees. There are hundreds of papers in the Vatican archives which presumably will reveal to scholars of the future the proceedings in secret commission meetings. Clerical journalists have described the intrigues and quarrels which led to the acceptance or rejection of conciliar documents. The more significant activities within commissions have not yet been fully revealed. The framing of amendments for the vote of the Fathers was the most delicate part of a commission's work. A determined group could wear down opposition and produce a formula patient of both an orthodox and modernistic interpretation.

Theologians of tomorrow will know more about the Council than those who took part.

BIRTH CONTROL

There is a more potent reason why the ordinary magisterium seems to have lost its nerve. The voices of the bishops are hushed mainly as a result of the universal confusion concerning contraception. Confessors, penitents and doctors repeatedly seek guidance which the shepherds of the flock are unable to provide because the Pope has asked them to do no more than repeat the teaching laid down in recent papal documents. The Pope has declared that this teaching must be followed until he feels obliged in conscience to change it.

It is important to remember that it was the Pope personally who reserved this matter to himself. I was surprised to read in Fr. Murphy's article last week that the "bishops are to be held blameworthy for the misery of Catholic couples whose number is legion... Their plight seems to be callously neglected by the members of the Church's magisterium who have decided to hold the traditional line no matter what the cost." "A large number of Catholics," Fr. Murphy adds, "are convinced that the magisterium is dragging its feet on this issue. Apostolic Catholics feel themselves hampered by the failure of responsible members of the magisterium to solve the problem in the light of the progressive stand taken by the Vatican Council over the nature of marriage... The failure of the hierarchy to involve itself explicitly in the argument is *all but criminal* (my italics). Leaving the burden solely in the hands of the Pope does not, under the present circumstances, seem right or proper."

It happens that Fr. Francis Xavier Murphy is an old friend of mine. He knows well that the bishops did not choose to leave the burden solely in the hands of the Pope. I refer him to that splendid book *The Third Session* by Xavier Rynne (p. 128) where the distinguished author says: "The Holy Father has reserved to himself a final decision in this matter." The option of defying the Pope is tempting to bishops and, indeed, has been adopted by some. The majority, however, believe that they would give a poor example to their flock if they withheld obedience. Their reluctance to take the initiative does not demonstrate a lack of compassion.

Until the Pope gives the promised guidance, most bishops will continue to act with restraint. Every day their task becomes more difficult. The Pope has said that the doctrine of the Church is not in doubt. This does little to console the millions of Catholics who believe that although the teaching of Pius XI and Pius XII still holds the field a new interpretation is bound eventually to be approved by the Holy See. If indeed the old principles are to be adapted to the changed conditions of our time, Catholics resent this prolonged period of suspense.

The dilemma of the Holy Father is more complex than readers of last week's *Tablet* might gather. When Pope Paul withdrew contraception from the Council debates, he doubtless believed that a commission of theologians, doctors and scientists would soon give him the facts he needed for his statement. When their advice was not forthcoming he grew anxious and pressed them to make more haste. With the passing of the months he was to learn that neither theologians nor laity could decide unanimously.

The publication of the so-called majority and minority reports did not reveal the full intricacy of the discussions. It was not, as Fr. Murphy suggests, merely a question of holding the traditional line no matter what the cost. This is clear from the minority report which, although I presided at many meetings of the Pontifical Commission, I had not seen before it appeared in *The Tablet*. It was not signed by any of the cardinals or bishops. I assume that the priests who signed sent their views privately to the Pope. This does not constitute what in England we would call an official minority report.

DOCTORS DISAGREE

The problem facing the Pope concerns not only contraception itself but the morality of certain methods. This does not mean that the Pope must adjudicate on the various contraceptive appliances, chemicals or pills. This is obviously not the task of the Church. Herein, I imagine, the chief difficulty lies. Everyone knows that some contraceptives are abortifacients while others induce temporary sterility. It follows that the morality of sterilisation and abortion might need to be reconsidered. Medical science is not yet ready to pronounce on the likely effects of contraceptive pills. Many doctors regard them as reasonably safe. A strong minority will have nothing to do with them in the present state of medical knowledge. They will not permit their wives to take the risk of using them. It may not yet be possible to prove a causal connection between smoking and lung cancer. A causal connection between the use of certain contraceptive pills and thrombosis is

similarly under investigation. There are doctors who fear that deleterious effects may reveal themselves only in a future generation. They refer, pompously to the lesson provided by the thalidomide babies. All this has to be weighed by the Pope before he gives the Church his guidance. It would be irresponsible to attempt to force the Vicar of Christ to make a pronouncement before he is ready.

Nobody knows what the world will be like in ten years' time. Under God it depends largely on the great powers. Before the end of this decade China will almost certainly have developed every kind of nuclear device. We know from scientists that if testing continues on a large scale the effects will be unpredictable. Thirty years ago the experts warned us of the risk of depopulation. We now know that they were wrong. The experts today give warning of intolerable over-population by the end of the century. They, in turn, may be made wrong by genetic changes in mankind. What the Pope says will, of course, have comparatively small effect on total world population. The majority in Asia, Africa and South America is not likely to be guided by papal pronouncements. Those most anxiously awaiting guidance are the devoted Catholics living mainly in the West who are troubled less by the threat of over-population than by the physical and psychological hazards of married life in modern conditions. It is these people and their clergy who desperately await the promised statement. Today in the same town, and even in the same parish, priests in the confessional offer conflicting advice. I believe this to be the chief reason for the present state of the magisterium.