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LEX ORANDI – LEX CREDENDI IN SOME HOMILIES OF LEO THE GREAT

In modern times the axiom *lex orandi –lex credendi* is one of the most popular principles among theologians. It is used by Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants with equal enthusiasm. Now and then it is also used polemically against another confession: our church sticks to *lex orandi –lex credendi* better than your yours!

The principle is, then generally accepted, but problematically enough, it is understood in many ways. This applies in particular to the first part of it, that is, the *lex orandi* part.

The **minimalist** interpretation refers to 1 Tim. 2:1-2 where St. Paul says: I urge you that petitions, prayers, supplications, and thanksgivings be offered for all men.” In old Latin this exhortation is called a “lex”, a law. Originally the principle *lex orandi* was called *lex supplicandi*, and supplication is what St. Paul is here calling for. *Lex orandi* means, then, simply that we should pray for the salvation of all men.

An **intermediate** interpretation holds that *lex orandi* means more than than just intercessions for all men and their salvation. It means prayer in general, and liturgical prayers in particular. In practice this would mean that according to the principle, prayers used during the liturgy somehow has a relationship to the beliefs of the church. But then we are faced with the question whether *lex orandi-lex credendi* means that the liturgy has the priority, or forms the base, for doctrine. If so, could there be other bases for doctrine as well? I guess most scholars would say “yes, doctrine is based on Scripture, tradition, councils as well as on liturgy.” If so, it would be correct to change the axiom a bit and say: *multae leges legem credendi statuunt, exempli gratia lex orandi?* (Many principles support the law of faith, for example the law of prayer). Fur-

ther it can be asked whether *lex orandi -lex credendi* is always the only and right order of faith and prayer, or can it be reversed: *lex credendi - lex orandi*? From the times of Origen and Basil the Great we remember how they were prepared to change the prayers in order to have them express better the doctrinal position of the church. In more modern times pope Pius XII in his bull *Mediator Dei* from 1947 wrote that “it is perfectly correct to say, “*Lex credendi legem statuat supplicandi.*” The liturgy does not, according to him, decide or determine independently what Catholic faith is.

In Pius XII we meet the third interpretation of *lex supplicandi/orandi*: *orandi* does not only mean intercession, nor the official prayers: it means the entire liturgy. This **maximalist** interpretation is popular indeed in modern times, not least among those theologians who are engaged in the liturgical renewal of the church.

We may, then, understand the axiom differently even among ourselves. But in the following let's see what Leo, a contemporary of Prosper of Aquitaine, contributed to the question. Like Prosper he was engaged in polemics against (Semi-) Pelagianism and in need of good arguments in order to refute it. As sources I use a limited number of Leo's homilies, first of all those delivered on Christmas day, already discussed by professor Argarate.

The people of God, gathered together to hear **Sermon XXI** (NPNF) on the Feast of Nativity, is first exhorted to rejoice on this “birthday of Life”. The first half of this Christmas sermon is devoted to a clear presentation of the doctrine of Christ's two natures. The latter half, however, contains practical consequences of the first part. The first thing mentioned is “Give thanks to God, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit”. Thanksgiving by prayer or hymns is a central part of *lex orandi*, they are presented here as a logical consequence of God's love shown to us in Christ's birth. Another consequence of Christ's becoming man is that we should “put off the old man”, renounce the works of the flesh, and adopt the new humanity inaugurated and exemplified by Christ. From *lex credendi* meaning belief in the incarnation we advance to an example of **lex vivendi**: the doctrine has consequences for our lives as Christians, and not only for our spirituality.

I am, however, a bit uneasy about calling the birth of Christ a “doctrine.” It is, of course, an important part of the baptismal creed, and of the creed of Nicaea and Constantinople I. But it is treated more like a biblical fact which is actualized “today”, on Christmas day, and only in a secondary sense, a doctrine.

The beginning of **Sermon XXII** on the Feast of the Nativity contains, again, an exhortation to joy because of the divine “mystery” of the virgin birth. Incarnation and kenosis are explained, and how the devil was deceived by the virgin birth. Again the second part of the Homily is devoted to some practical consequences of the Incarnation: “by the Incarnation, to you was given the power to return from afar to your Maker.” The ethical consequences of the Incarnation are then discussed at some length. In the final part of the sermon the listeners are urged to “abide firm in the Faith in which you are built.” Faith (*credendi*) is here mentioned explicitly. This is needed, since during the same festival people were present who thought that the festival originated, not in Christ’s incarnation, but in the rising of the new sun.” This means that in fact two different festivals were going on in the same time, in the same place, with the same rituals, but with different doctrinal content, with different CREDO/to pisteuo. Leo concludes his sermon by saying that the sun, moon, and the stars, are God’s creations and says: “Praise God, dearly beloved, in all His works and judgements,” but do not worship “the creation which does God service.” Here we are faced with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (which is explicitly mentioned), and this belief in creation “*statuat legem orandi*”. Belief in the Creator has the praise of the Creator as a consequence. From a doctrine we arrive, not at the liturgy in its entirety, but to prayers of thanksgiving. Whether these prayers are ones with a fixed wording is not told, but I get the impression that Leo is appealing to a rather spontaneous prayer here, prayer in the church but possibly also elsewhere.

In the introduction of **Sermon XXIII** the Nativity of the Lord is said to bring eternal joy – joy once again. It is of course natural that one should emphasize joy at Christmas, but there is more to it than “happy Christmas” only. Leo goes on to discuss the virginity

of Mary and the two natures of Christ. The Son is equal to the Father in his divine nature, and less than the Father in his human nature. Leo's theology is that of the Athanasian Creed.

Here we also find a passage against Arian doctrine: the Son is not less than the Father in his Divine nature. An explanation of the Kenosis of Christ follows. The people of God celebrating Christmas receives a considerable amount of solid doctrinal information! But Leo avoids an intellectualistic, purely theoretical exposition. All this took place "for our salvation," Leo says, it is not pure theory, or history.

The final part of this short sermon concerns the moral consequences of Christ's incarnation. Christians become members of His body and should behave accordingly. The application of the theoretical part is, then, concerned with *lex vivendi/agendi* more than with *lex orandi*.

Sermon XXIV begins with some Old Testament predictions concerning the incarnation, and goes on to the virgin birth. Once more Leo asks us to rejoice. But this time we get a more precise picture of the kind of joy Leo is talking about: the hearts of believers should turn to God's praise, and the sons of men confess His wondrous acts". Joy is, then, not only smiling faces: it is a heart praising God, and a mouth confessing God's deeds! Thus we get from Christian doctrine first to joy and then from joy to prayer, to *lex orandi*. Prayer is not just a logical consequence of doctrine. Prayer is joyous gratefulness for the facts or events expressed through doctrine.

Next, Leo discusses the virgin birth and the two natures' doctrine. Our regeneration by the Spirit is a consequence of the virgin birth of Christ. Our baptismal water is a parallel to the womb of Mary. Then follows more doctrinal considerations: Leo rejects Manichaeism with its docetist Christology. In this Christmas sermon he engages into polemics against Arius, Macedonius, and Sabellius. He appeals to the congregation to remain firm in the Faith which they have professed before many witnesses (in the baptismal Creed). The sermon ends with an admonition to stick to the faith, the faith which is a mighty bulwark, to which nothing can be added or taken away. This Christmas sermon is partly very

doctrinal, but it is not pure theory: there is a strong appeal to personal engagement, to “remain firm” in faith.

In **Sermon XXVI** Leo touches upon topics belonging to the realm of spirituality, and to liturgy as well. The believers meditate our Lord's birth from Virgin: that will cause groans of supplication, shouting of praise, the offering of a sacrifice. Christ's birth is adored in heaven and earth. Christmas day is said to be the best day for such activities: the facts of the Gospel narrative such as the virgin birth, the shepherds, and the angelic hymn are described and praised. “Faith” is clearly not a doctrine here, but the acceptance of the magnificent Gospel narrative. By believing we, too, Leo says, may say with the army of angelic powers: “Glory in the highest to God, and on earth peace to men of good will.” This is liturgical language, but may be not an actual song. In the second part of the homily the people of God are said to adore the birth of our Saviour, and in the same time it celebrates the beginning of our own eternal life. In this homily the emphasis is less on doctrine than on adoration. The doctrines implicitly present are contained in the biblical narrative.

The sermon On the Nativity of the Lord **nr XXVII** begins as follows:

“Today's feast, dearly beloved, is truly venerated and duly celebrated by any person who confesses nothing false concerning the Lord's incarnation, and nothing that is unworthy of his deity. For either to deny him the truth of our human nature, or to deny him equal glory with the Father, are sins of equal danger. Therefore when we attempt to understand the sacrament of Christ's nativity - his birth to a virgin mother - the shroud of earthly reasoning should be removed”

From this passage we can see that the celebration of Christ's birthday, i.e. Christmas, is not *ex opere operato*, as such, correct behavior. Certain conditions need to be met first, only thereafter the veneration is “true” and “duly celebrated”. The condition required is that we should confess nothing false concerning Christ's humanity or Divinity. I understand this to mean: the two-nature doctrine has the priority. It is the most fundamental part of Leo's Christmas celebration. Veneration and celebration are also some-

thing excellent, but their value is dependent on correct belief in Christ's two natures. Leo does not hesitate to state, in the middle of Christmas celebrations: it is divine authority that we trust and divine teaching that we must follow. But "veneration" and "celebration" are, as I see it, most central parts of *lex orandi*. Therefore I dare draw the conclusion: *lex credendi scilicet duas naturas in Christo esse statuat legem orandi*. Leo argues from doctrine to prayer and liturgy also in connection with other doctrines than the Christological ones, as we have seen. In the homily quoted above one more dogma is mentioned, the one about the virgin birth. The acceptance of it belongs to a correct celebration of Christmas, too, but we are not told what liturgical consequences that doctrine is connected with. In my North-European context this statement of Leo becomes exciting. In my country Christmas is celebrated indeed, and songs and prayers said, but the acceptance of a virgin birth is getting increasingly rare even among theologians. Leo will not accept such a *lex orandi* disconnected from *lex credendi*. Too often the *orandi* and *credendi* are separated. Christmas is accepted since it brings feeling and a devotional atmosphere. A similar situation occurs before Easter when our churches are crowded with people listening to the Requiems by Mozart, Brahms, and others. But the belief, the *credendi*, in Atonement and Resurrection may be absent.

In Rome in the times of Leo there was a similar problem. In the Sermon XXVII on Christmas day Leo had to deal also with the old solar cult, the veneration of *Sol Invictus*. This was so, in spite of the fact that Christian Christmas had been celebrated in Rome for about a century. People in the city of Rome, among them also some church going people, continued their old habit to greet the rising sun. This is lack of knowledge, this is paganism, Leo declared from his pulpit. Again we are faced with a similar problem to the one mentioned above: people did indeed venerate, and they prayed, but the *credendi* was not correctly understood, and the prayers in question were of no avail. One more instance of the same problem is revealed when Leo warns his audience celebrating Christmas NOT to pray to the stars in order to avoid the cruel

laws of Destiny. There was, then, much praying in Leo's flock, but praying was not always paired with correct belief.

Again, in the same homily, Leo draws attention to the doctrine of creation, and the Creator. A Christian should, when seeing beauty on the earth, praise and glorify to the Creator of that beauty. Here he moves, again, from a doctrine (the 1st article in the Creed) to *lex orandi*.

Finally a short glance at some Easter and Ascension Day sermons:

Sermon LXXI On the Lord's resurrection was devoted in its entirety to the new man born with Christ in the resurrection. Moral consequences of the Easter events are in the focus: do not live according to old nature (flesh) but as a new creature. We note that Leo moves from *lex credendi* (resurrectionem) to *lex vivendi*, not to *lex orandi*.

In **Sermon LXXII** On the Lord's resurrection Leo presents an exhortation to imitate Christi in every possible way. Modest and poor people celebrate Easter correctly, Leo says, since Christ was such. The worst way of celebrating Easter is by accepting a heretic teaching about Christ. The sermon ends with the statement that it is impossible to celebrate Easter unless one sticks to the Creed and its teaching of the virgin birth, Christ's true suffering, the resurrection, and ascension. In other words: without correct doctrine, there is no true celebration of Easter.

In **Sermon LXXIII** On Ascension Leo states: "Since Christ's Ascension is our uplifting, and the hope of the body (=our body) is raised, whither the glory of the Head (=Christ) has gone before, let us exult, dearly-beloved, with worthy joy and delight in the loyal paying of thanks!" "Today" we Christians, have ascended into heaven with Christ - that's why *lex orandi et laudandi* comes into force.

Some conclusions:

Leo the Great chose to preach, not on all Sundays or festivals, but on the central ones, such as Easter, Christmas, and Pentecost.

This gave him the opportunity to teach and preach the most central dogmas to his congregation. In almost all sermons the doctrine of Christ's two natures is present. But he does not present doctrine theoretically, but as living dogma. From *lex credendi dogmata* Leo continues, more often than not, to ethical consequences of the doctrine. Persons believing in a Christian way should also live in a Christian way. This means, that to Leo, the most important principle is *lex credendi statuat legem vivendi*. However, quite often he encourages his audience to thanksgiving and worship. This means that *lex credendi statuat et legem orandi* is also important, as it was to Pius XII in the 20th century. The doctrines do not, however, require a prayer with a fixed wording, they just give an impulse towards thanksgiving. To judge from the Sermons discussed above Leo does not give much importance to the support liturgical praxis can provide to doctrine. Not even Prosper of Aquitaine considered that support unique or necessary. That is ONE thing. Another, equally important fact is that, according to Leo, both the *credere* and the *orare*, the believing and the praying, are extremely important. They belong together, to say it with the words of the Council, "inseparabiliter" et "indivise." But that is another matter than saying that one has priority over the other.

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