

Some Reflections on Magisterium in the Early Church¹

by

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The nature and operation of the Magisterium often seem to complicate ecumenical discussion especially (but not only) when Anglicans and Roman Catholics of strong good will come together for mutual exploration on the road towards unity. No one has done more than Father Congar to remind us that the history of theology may have crucial lessons to teach us about the nature of the problems confronting the church of today in its quest for the right way to express the Gospel in respect of both mission and unity. At the same time the appeal to history can never be direct, and unsophisticated in the sense that we can approach the Fathers for ready-made solutions to our problems. The Fathers do not offer plain answers that can be simply appropriated without much serious thinking about their modern application. Our sights can be set upon a more modest target: we can go to them asking for a little light on the way in which some of our present problems came to be problems at all. And at least they can teach the contemporary church that there can be alternative ways of approach.

The first Christians believed and knew that God had spoken to the fathers by the prophets and that in these last days he had spoken by his Son. The Old Testament retained a self-evident authority beside, and in subordination to, the Messiah who had now come. After the Ascension and the withdrawal of the direct presence of the Risen Lord, there were thorny questions of authority to solve. What had the Lord intended in regard to the observance of the law of Moses by Gentile or even indeed by Jewish Christians? Who was to decide? Some looked towards the Holy Family and saw in James of Jerusalem, the Lord's brother, their special leader whose judgement commanded the deepest respect. The story preserved by Hegesippus about the continuation of the church of Jerusalem under the leadership of the surviving members of the Holy Family underlines this. Their position was finally ended by the second Jewish revolt and Hadrian's edict expelling all Jews from his newly founded, all-Gentile city of Aelia Capitolina. But the weakening of the authority of the Holy Family within the church was not due simply to the political catastrophes befalling Jerusalem and Judaea. After the birth narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke had become accepted, their implications would have gone far to remove the aura from the notion of a Christian caliphate. Once the position was understood that Mary's virginity was perpetual, and that the Lord's adelphoi were cousins or half-brothers, then the blood relationship could hardly be invoked any more.

The Pauline epistles and Acts show how the brethren of the Lord retained authority, but not in the same way as the Apostles, whom the Lord had explicitly commissioned to go out to preach the gospel. The Twelve enjoyed such standing that it became difficult for St. Paul to gain recognition of the Lord's specific commission to him to preach to the Gentiles, parallel to that which St. Peter (on St. Paul's understanding of the matter) had received for the Jewish world. If, beside James, Peter and John the son of Zebedee are named as persons of special standing in Galatians 2, one cannot help linking this with

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the fact that in the final chapter of St. John's gospel the Lord makes a special last testament to Peter and John - and also with the fact that Ephesus, with the Johannine tradition, and Rome, with the tradition of Peter and Paul, become special centres of authoritative tradition for the second century.

When, after the apostles died, the church found itself continuing to live in this world, there was no clear authority to guide. Nothing was more natural than to look to the churches of apostolic foundation and to those bishops who had enjoyed immediate contact with the apostolic generation. The bishop at once became central to the structure of the church, and round him gathered both the habits of institutionalism and the juridical notions of authority which were needed to justify and to maintain his position. St. Paul had said that the Lord bestowed a diversity of gifts on his church: some to be apostles, some prophets, others pastors and teachers; and no doubt Hans Küng is right in insisting that the apostle did not expect all these gifts to be concentrated in one place. Nevertheless the bishop was expected to combine something of all these diverse gifts: to preside over the worship of the community, to continue the apostolic missionary task (thereby standing always at the points of contact between the church and external society); and at the same time to be the guardian of the authenticity of the gospel preached within the church and accordingly the judge of the limits of toleration.

But by what criteria could he judge? Ignatius of Antioch kept unity in a centrifugal situation by enjoining adherence to the bishop. It was a pragmatic answer with the merit of simplicity. But it becomes less simple as soon as there is dispute whether the bishop himself is right. Ignatius is not laying down that all the congregation must believe everything that their chief shepherd believes in precisely the same form down to the smallest detail. He is enjoining the whole church to unite with their bishop in the life of the church where the word of God is preached and Christ's sacraments are found. To abandon the bishop is therefore not just to indulge a personal and private obstinacy in face of the duly constituted authority, nor even to show oneself spiritually blind to the inspired charisma of his utterance. It is to leave the holy community of the people of God, which is altogether more serious. Therefore, let no one do any ecclesial action apart from the bishop: wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; for where Christ is, there is the katholiké ekklesia (Smyrn. 8). The guardian of the truth against doctrines which Ignatius calls 'heterodoxies' is the fellowship of the local church. If we inquire what Ignatius would have called orthodoxy, his answer seems to consist in a short catalogue of the fundamental historical facts about Jesus Christ who is our God and Saviour. There are no subtle speculations or detailed distinctions to his concept of right doctrine. The revelation of God in Christ is the very basis of the community's life; it follows that those who do not hold to the one have also lost the other. Gospel and Church so interpenetrate one another that we cannot begin to ask Ignatius which for him had theological priority.

To Irenaeus, likewise, the church is where the Spirit is. It is the bank in which the apostles have deposited the treasure of the truth. Irenaeus protests that the apostles did not misunderstand Christ or misrepresent him (as Marcion and some of the gnostics claimed), but faithfully handed on his word in the scriptures and to those bishops and presbyters to whom they entrusted local churches. To be a heretic is first and foremost

to reject scripture, or to put a wilful misinterpretation upon it, demonstrated to be a misinterpretation by its divergence from the regula veritatis. Innovation is the criterion of divergence. The good theologian's duty is not to tickle the ears of his audience with bright new ideas, but to uphold the given and the authoritative, and, where the authority of scripture looks as if it might be self-contradictory, to lay bare the inner reconciliation whereby its revelatory status can stand unimpugned and unimpaired. Irenaeus loves to contrast the unchanging, monolithic, timeless, and above all unanimous orthodoxy of the church with the constantly changing flux of the gnostic sects - fissiparous, restless, conceited, with a traceable mutual influence upon one another, and only agreed on one thing - their rejection of the true gospel and the true church. L'Histoire des Variations is a classic restatement of an essentially Irenaeian theme which may be summed up in the single phrase, confidence in the church. For Irenaeus the gospel is identical from Mesopotamia to distant Britain, one creed, one rule of faith, because there is one God, one Christ, one Spirit.

The sober historian can see far more diversity of theology within this one church than Irenaeus' high romanticism is interested in disclosing. Yet perhaps Irenaeus was not wrong in supposing that the notion of an authentic Christianity is bound up in some sense with the notion that the Redeemer is the same, yesterday, today, and for ever. Christ may indeed mean different things to different believers, and indeed to one and the same believer at different stages of his spiritual pilgrimage; for there is a maturation of spiritual and theological understanding. Nevertheless in this diversity of ways it is one and the same Lord who is being apprehended. The proposition may be extremely difficult to demonstrate to a radically sceptical mind, and perhaps in the last analysis one can only say that the existence of such an entity as authentic Christianity is a requirement and an affirmation of faith.

Irenaeus does not exclude the possibility of variety in theology. He says nothing to imply that 'orthodoxy' is a detailed and complex system of doctrines accepted on juridical authority. The limits of tolerable deviation are laid down in the relatively simple statements of the Rule of Faith and the baptismal confession. And many secondary matters may safely be left as open questions. There are many things in scripture which really are obscure. But Irenaeus is content to live with such unanswered riddles. It is folly to allow difficulty over small issues to lead one into general scepticism about some large and central matter (adv. Haer. II, 10, 1). There are mysteries concerning the fall of man, about the divine purpose in dealing with evil, about the transcendent generation of the only-begotten Son, which we may indeed ponder but our pondering ought to lead us to an O Altitudo..

In short, in Irenaeus the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy are limited to those central affirmations, denial of which makes Christianity something radically other than it is intended to be, and therefore cuts at the very lifeline of our redemption. Heresy is a word that implies deliberate choice by an individual or group in conscious rejection of the expressed mind of the community. Scripture is above all the charter of the community's life and the source of its doctrine. But Irenaeus is also able to appeal to reason and to the paradox of the apostolic churches within which the authentic meaning of scripture is guaranteed. Irenaeus' appeal to tradition is most effective where it is most general; that is, where it invokes the

coherence and self-consistency of the Christian pattern of doctrine (creation, fall, incarnation, the church, sacraments, last things). In a few particulars he appeals to the oral tradition of the presbyters who knew the apostles, where he wishes to reinforce a conclusion that cannot actually be demonstrated from the text of scripture, e.g. that the Lord lived to a ripe old age (ii, 22, 5), or that the authentic number of the Beast in Revelation is 666, not the variant reading 616 (v, 30, 1), or that the millennial hope is to be literally understood of an earthly kingdom lasting for an actual thousand years (v, 36, 1-2, Epid. 61).

The acceptance of tradition as a norm for the interpretation of scripture obviously offered fresh possibilities, some hazardous. At times the appeal to its authority is intended to oppose innovation and means, Stick to the old paths and well tried forms. At other times the appeal can express a certain kind of liberation from the past where the written text of scripture seems both constricting and insufficient. But the essential argument of Irenaeus remains impressive: by the Rule of Faith tradition guides teachers to see what matters in scripture and what is important and fundamental. This is what the church is called to teach. But the story of fourth century debate offers many illustrations of the reluctance of the great leaders of orthodoxy to add to the catalogue of essentials and to suppose that orthodoxy includes everything that the contemporary Christian community holds down to small details.

In Hilary of Poitiers a characteristic theme is that true believers are well content with (and very sufficiently instructed by) the creed of their baptism. But heretics force the orthodox into risky and speculative positions by their own curiositas in going beyond what the human mind can safely express in words. The Arians who place Christ on the level of the created order are plainly heretical. But Hilary wants to regard the moderate conservatives in the homoiousian party as merely mistaken, not heretical. They have no intention to deny the fundamental truth. They simply have not yet seen that the Nicene homousios is necessary to safeguard it, having been distracted by the misleading Sabellian construction that has been placed upon the formula.

Hilary writes at a critical moment in the controversy when all the weight of the emperor Constantius' support has turned towards the support of Valens of Mursa and his disingenuous advocacy of the vague formula that "the Son is 'like' the Father" without any further qualification to say in what respect he is 'like'. The programme of Valens and Constantius frowns upon any use of either homousios or homoiousios. Hilary sets out to defend the Nicene formula by an unusual route. The bishops who met at Nicaea were extremely reluctant to launch into theological speculation. In using their basic term they were going beyond scripture and did not enjoy that. Yet their word was given them by Arius himself when he poured scorn upon it in his letter to Alexander of Alexandria, smearing it with the label 'Manichee'. The Nicene fathers saw that only by using this word could they be sure of safeguarding the meaning of scripture. Hilary writes as if aware that the necessity of a technical formula was responsible for introducing a perceptible modification of the concept of orthodoxy. In itself the change was modest: to the majority of bishops at Nicaea the precise meaning of the term may have been obscure, but to a Western divine, with the adversus Praxean of Tertullian behind him, the formula 'unius

substantiae' (or 'eiusdem substantiae') was important simply as asserting the 'divinity' of Christ rather than as explaining the mystery of the divine Sonship. In the hands of trained logicians such as Marius Victorinus the concept of unity of substance quickly came to look very technical indeed. What was the distinction between identity within difference on the one hand and difference within identity on the other? What is it to say 'the same'? Is the identity of which the Nicene creed speaks a specific or a generic sameness? Hilary of Poitiers thought that he had sufficiently clarified the problem if he interpreted the homousion to mean equality rather than specific identity. In the technicalities of the matter he seems to have hoped that his readers would not become too interested. Likewise, with regard to the incipient controversy concerning the Holy Spirit, Hilary was content to take the reticent Nicene formula in simplicity: none will dare to rank the Spirit of God among the creatures, for he is sent from the Father through the Son. How this is so human words cannot express.

Despite the embarrassments and reluctances of its principal defenders, the council of Nicaea established within the church the necessity and fitness of a highly technical term as a safeguard of authentic faith. Hilary insists that the definition has added nothing but clarification to the faith he had professed at baptism (long before he had ever heard of the Nicene formula), and in one surprisingly risky passage of his Liber ad Constantium of 360 he tells the emperor he would be content to drop the Nicene formula and to go back to his baptismal symbol - that would be incomparably better than the ludicrous spectacle of a new creed every few months, which was making the church a laughing-stock in pagan eyes. Perhaps the concession was no more than a move in a long debate; for in the vehement denunciation of the contra Constantium, written shortly afterwards, Hilary has been moved, by the disingenuous behaviour of Valens and by disillusion with the outcome of the council of Rimini, into a more unbending and intransigent position.

The very refined questions raised by the Apollinarians and the Christological controversy could only be settled in terms of some technical formula. Here certainly it was inevitable that use be made of physis, prosopon, hypostasis, etc. Yet even the Chalcedonian definition, with its plethora of boggy-words, shows every sign of attempting to give directly religious meaning to its carefully balanced words. The importance of the formula lay not so much in the precise language used to secure the affirmation, but in the underlying conviction that the Redeemer is both truly God and truly man; that is, that the Lord, to whom and through whom Christians pray, himself prayed. The Chalcedonian definition invited the hairsplitting and delicate finesse to which it was soon to be subjected by Leontius of Byzantium and, after him, Maximus Confessor. They could not afford to neglect the methods of their leading Monophysite opponents. Nevertheless the double homousion of Chalcedon ('of one substance with the Father in respect of his deity, of one substance with us in respect of his humanity') makes it clear that the underlying, driving concern is to preserve in their integrity the two basic soteriological schemes found in the New Testament itself. The first runs that we fallen and perishing creatures, sinking in our finitude, mortality, and sin, are redeemed by the sovereign act of the Creator himself, coming across the gulf between eternity and time, Creator and creature, to lift us up to himself. The second runs that we fallen, yet glorious creatures, in our ignorance and grave moral failure, are restored to the Creator's intention by solidarity with the mediating Highpriest, the pioneer of our salvation, who by his active obedience opened the

way to heaven and so gave us both example and (sacramental) grace to participate in his victory over sin and death. When the shorthand of the Chalcedonian definition is spelt out in full, its profound religious meaning becomes clear, and the technical terms fall into proper perspective.

In the first and earlier part of the second century, councils were not part of the regular machinery of church government. We know of no assembly of bishops being summoned to deal with the gnostic crisis, although this was perhaps as acute a crisis as any to be survived by the church. The first councils, beginning towards the end of the second century, settled practical questions of general concern: the date of Easter, the limits of the New Testament canon, the terms for the readmission of those who lapsed under persecution. But during the third century the Monarchian controversy was beginning to raise difficult theological issues that needed conference for a conclusion. The individual bishop no longer felt so clear about the matter that he knew his duty to be to excommunicate the offending teacher without asking for the common mind of his colleagues. On at least two occasions third-century councils called in an expert theologian, in presbyteral orders, to advise the bishops how to act.

No one at this stage inquired into the theory of conciliar authority, or the nature of the submission which its decisions expected. Was the obedience required by the council a matter of church discipline, i.e. a keeping in step by not publicly contradicting the decision? or was it a matter touching the very faith itself? If it was the latter, could the council claim, or be claimed to have the power to make infallibly correct pronouncements? The fourth century was the golden age of church councils in the sense that a very great number were held. But it was hardly the golden age so far as their authority is concerned. Their successively contradictory statements, especially under the emperor Constantius, helped to undermine confidence. If the issues were really so technical that the experts could not agree, it was difficult for the laity to feel undiminished enthusiasm for their labours. The attitude of half-ironic detachment that appears in Ammian's account of church controversies was not merely a pagan view; it emerges also in the pages of Socrates' Ecclesiastical History, especially in his final observation that controversy is the very stuff of church history and his prayer that future ecclesiastical historians may find nothing to write about. Yet one council came well out of the Arian controversy, namely Nicaea. Hilary did not regard the formula as an indispensable sine qua non, but he believed that the Nicene fathers were inspired and that their number was the sacred 318 of the servants of Abraham. Athanasius frequently reiterates that orthodoxy consists in intention, not in formulae, and (like Hilary) was willing to treat with the homoiousian party as with brothers who disagreed about the proper technical terms to express truths on which they were all agreed. Yet it is unnecessary to stress how much the authority of the Nicene formula owed to his zealous advocacy. Both he and Hilary like to look back to the great council as having provided a full, perfect, and sufficient answer to all heresies. But that view of the council of Nicaea was a minority opinion which only succeeded in gaining acceptance after sixty years of hard controversy. It was always natural enough for the defenders of conciliar decisions to regard them as having settled the question - res judicata. After the Pelagians had been denounced by two African councils, whose decisions were approved by Rome, Augustine could exultantly cry Causa finita est, but the historian well knows that the real crisis of the controversy lay ahead and that Augustine was

to spend the next ten years arguing the truth of his doctrine of his grace without feeling able to rest on judicial decisions. In a classic passage he allows for the possibility of correction: Peter by Paul, Cyprian by a council, regional or provincial council by a plenarium ex universo orbe christiano; and even plenary councils may be amended by later ones. But in practice Augustine very seldom appeals to councils. His debates with Arianism scarcely invoke the Nicene formula. He was content to defend the ipsa fundamenta and to allow disagreement within the one church on secondary matters. The extent to which he allowed for variety in theology may be measured from the implications of his principle, strongly stated in the Confessions, that there may be many levels of meaning in scripture.

The great sees of Christendom played a subordinate role in the establishment of teaching authority, always in a close link with conciliar consultations. The community in Rome accepted a natural responsibility as leader in the great fraternity from the end of the first century; the author of the first epistle of Clement apologises to the Corinthians not for interfering but for having failed to interfere sooner, and invites the Corinthian church to submit 'not to us but to God's will' - a phrase in which the author clearly regarded the antithesis as merely theoretical. The special authority within Christendom of a church possessing such distinguished martyr-apostles as Peter and Paul was sure to be great, and the Roman church was exercising a leading role long before we find the first appeals to Tu es Petrus to provide some justification of this authority. It is superfluous here to trace the gradual rise of papal authority, and is sufficient merely to notice that this authority was greatly enhanced as a consequence of a certain scepticism about conciliar authority resulting from the conflicts of the fourth century. Jerome had obviously intimate attachment to the see of Rome after having served as Damasus' secretary and having drafted his letters in the correspondence about the Eastern church controversies. It seemed natural for him, when he was pursuing the ascetic life in the desert of Chalcis to turn away from the warring Greek factions at Antioch and to take the pragmatic solution that he would remain in communion with that bishop of Antioch (Paulinus) who happened to enjoy recognition by Rome, however undistinguished Paulinus' claims might otherwise be. Moreover, except for an awkward moment of hesitancy under Liberius, who thought it more important to preserve the unity of his domestic flock in Rome than to adopt a heroic stand against all compromise with Athanasius' opponents, the papacy emerged from the ebb and flow of the Arian dispute with the nimbus of having stood on the right side. A momentous shift occurs when under Damasus we first find the notion of a historical succession ('the tradition of Peter and Paul') giving way to the concept of a juridical inheritance of Petrine powers to bind and loose. From there it is no great step to the Tome of Leo, expressly written as an authoritative ruling on the Christological debate racking the Eastern churches, and regarded by its author as a final judgement on the entire discussion, requiring of the Greeks no more than a grateful acknowledgement of the Petrine decision. It was characteristic of the Greek theologians that they were glad to acknowledge the Tome as a genuinely Petrine utterance, but on the explicit ground that they had scrutinised its doctrine and found it to conform to their standards of orthodoxy.

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'The church' (declares the 20th of the Thirty-nine Articles

faith'. The ancient church would certainly have regarded this proposition as a self-evident platitude. The individual bishop in his diocese, the provincial council of bishops, the bishop with metropolitanical or, later, patriarchal or papal dignity - all at different stages and in different ways seek to express that universality of mission and that guardianship of the genuine and authentic gospel which are inherent in apostolicity. They judge first by scripture. Where scripture is obscure or silent, they judge by rational argument, and by the appeal to consensus. Both the bases of the teaching office and the very teaching office itself are multiple, never thought of as being concentrated in one community or one see. Moreover, a crucial part in the 'authority process' is played by subsequent reception by the faithful.

In the patristic period the definitions of councils held to be entirely binding upon the faithful always concern those affirmations without which Christianity ceases to be Christianity and becomes something else. On the horizon, however, there stood two clouds at first no larger than a man's hand: first, the admission of technical formulae was beginning to lead men to regard minutely defined scholastic propositions as essential for salvation, and therefore encouraging them to feel that, so long as they could be sure of correctness in all details of their theological speculative system, they would get to heaven - or at least the negative was true: except every one kept this faith whole and undefiled, without doubt he would perish everlastingly. Secondly, the pressure of popular devotional practices (images, relics of local saints, the propitiatory value of pilgrimage, etc.) came to seem in need of protection and vindication by authority; and this protection we can see beginning to emerge before 400 A.D.

Nevertheless, because in antiquity the concept of teaching authority within the church was multiple and diffused, the church of the Fathers did not know the pressure, felt when the authority appears to be single and almost unique, demanding that definitions be given on the ground that silent authorities are not much respected. And the fathers, for good or for ill, did not think about theology with the minds of canonists. They did not possess a Denzinger.