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AUTHORITY AND THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE*

At the risk of begging a number of questions that would deserve answers in a treatise but must remain unanswered in a lecture, the interests of clarity require that I should say a few words about the use I intend to make of the three terms: authority, conscience and the Christian conscience.

I distinguish authority from constraint. Constraint, as I understand it, is an external limitation imposed upon the freedom of behavior of those upon whom constraint is exercised. Constraint, according to one theory, by impeding the passage of Greek merchant vessels through the Dardanelles and only allowing them to proceed on payment of

*This article was the inaugural lecture of the annual Thomas Verner Moore Memorial Lecture series, newly established by St. Anselm's Abbey, Washington, D.C. as part of its fiftieth anniversary celebration and offered in cooperation with the School of Religious Studies and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of the Catholic University of America, 28 September 1974. On this occasion, the Catholic University of America conferred on Bishop Butler the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*. Elected Abbot of Downside Abbey for three successive terms (1946, 1954, 1962), Bishop Butler was also elected Abbot-President of the English Benedictine Congregation in 1961 and in that capacity he attended the sessions of the Second Vatican Council where his views on ecumenism and Scripture were highly valued.

In 1967 Pope Paul VI appointed Abbot Butler to be Auxiliary to the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Heenan. Currently, Bishop Butler acts as President of the diocesan seminary, St. Edmund's College at Ware, and serves as Episcopal Vicar for the county of Hertfordshire. The Editor is indebted to the kindness of the Rt. Rev. Alban Boulwood, O.S.B., Abbot of St. Anselm's Abbey, Washington, for permission to publish this inaugural lecture.

AUTHORITY AND THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

customs charges to the Trojans, provoked the Siege of Troy. Trojan constraint had limited the freedom of movement of the Greek sailors, and Greek constraint eventually destroyed the power of Troy and placed the constraint of death upon its king. Constraint, then, operates by limiting human freedom. This it can do not only by the actual exercise of force but by the threat of force—sanctions as we call them today. An unscrupulous citizen might be deterred from falsifying his tax returns only by the fear of civil punishment. In short, we may say that as constraint increases in range and effectiveness, so freedom is diminished.

Authority is often combined with constraint, and it is often held that authority and freedom are related in the same way as constraint and freedom; so that when authority increases in effectiveness and range, freedom is correspondingly diminished. I do not so understand authority.

True authority makes no attempt to diminish human freedom. On the contrary, it presupposes that freedom and, in principle, desires to see it functioning untrammelled. For authority does not dictate with the threat of sanctions; it appeals to freedom and invites freedom to come into act. But the freedom it appeals to is responsible freedom. The characteristic language of authority is not the language of necessity (“you *must* do so or so—or else”) but the language of duty: “You ought to behave in the way I propose, and in so behaving you will expand the area of your true freedom.”

For freedom is not something that exists by and in itself. It is directed to a goal in which it will find its own full self-expression. It has an intention inscribed within it, and this intention summons it to become not mere freedom to do anything you like, but responsible freedom: a freedom that adjusts itself and its subject to the reality beyond itself, apart from which there can be no subject and no freedom.

Responsible freedom looks beyond itself to a norm of action that is conformed to reality. And it is to responsible freedom that authority addresses itself, not to constrain or to command but to illuminate and enable. At the moment when authority takes on the aspect of command and menace, it allows itself to be corrupted by constraint.

Authority is not absent from the world of science and intellectual growth. The world of science is maintained in actual existence by the collaboration of many scientists, and this collaboration depends on mutual confidence between scientists. If every scientist had to make for

himself the discoveries, and give birth within himself, unaided and undirected, to the intuitions of an Einstein, there would be little progress in science. Very many scientists take their Einstein on trust because they have recognized his authority. Even those who prefer to re-think Einstein for themselves choose to do so because they recognize the authority of their predecessor, directing them to this set of questions and answers rather than to a myriad of alternatives that lack similar authority.

Note, however, that the authority of the great scientists is not something that imposes itself against the will of those on whom it is exercised. On the contrary, they welcome it and it is only as so welcomed and voluntarily accepted that it enlarges, instead of constraining, their thought.

Freedom, exercised with responsibility, is what I propose to call conscience, though I am aware that a respectable linguistic tradition prefers to use the word "conscience" always of an act of judgment and not of a habit of responsibility. The conscientious man, for me, is the same as the man of good will to whom the Second Vatican Council addressed its message in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. He is not necessarily a Christian believer, though he may be such.

The Christian conscience is the conscience of a man who has accepted as true, and wishes to follow as a guide for behavior, the self-disclosure of God in and as Christ. I hasten to add that, in my view, this acceptance and the resultant resolution for behavior, are themselves, in one aspect, the fruit of responsible freedom. A Christian who has not yet reached years, as we used to say, of discretion, one who is not yet able to exercise responsible freedom because of his immaturity, is not capable of Christian responsibility in the full sense; has no developed Christian conscience. A full Christian is one who has discovered that he will be what he has made himself, and that he has freedom and therefore an obligation to make himself such as he ought to be.

Christian faith, accepted by the believer in particular acts and then by a habit of responsible freedom, relates a man directly to God. Directly, but mediately; and the mediator is Jesus Christ. Thus directed, the believer attains a certain knowledge of God. God is in himself the Absolute Mystery, the unattainable horizon and infinite support, of all created existence. And yet man has an unquenchable,

if often hardly conscious, aspiration to penetrate that Mystery and to know the unknowable. And the Christian believes that "he that hath seen" Jesus of Nazareth "has seen the Father." We cannot know God by our own efforts; but God has spoken a word in our human language, a Word made flesh for our salvation—and not least for our intellectual salvation.

JESUS REVEALS GOD

Because God is unattainable by our own efforts, the Word of God comes to us from beyond the horizon of our experience. But because we have a latent aspiration towards God, He comes to us as the Reality for which we were made, and in whom we find our own full expansion and self-realization. Moreover, this latent aspiration of our being is fundamental to our existence. It slumbers in the very heart or apex of our being, and it is when the Word of God is spoken within us that we begin really to live and not merely to exist. Only a personal Word of a personal God could thus meet and supply the latent possibilities of our personhood. No general or abstract law, law of the material universe or law of natural morality, not even such a law revealed by God, could thus touch us and lift us at once beyond ourselves and into our full selfhood.

The Word of God made flesh is thus not just our lawgiver. He is above all the one who speaks God to us; and who does so both by what he says and by what he is and does and suffers. He is, in the plenitude of his historical existence, not only the mediator but the fullness of divine self-disclosure and of divine self-giving.

What does he tell us of God by his words? He tells us that God is supremely and, it would seem, unconditionally generous. "He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust." He is the shepherd who leaves the ninety and nine sheep on the mountainside while he goes in search of the one sheep that had strayed. He is the woman who, instead of rejoicing over the nine drachmas that she has not lost, searches high and low for the one lost coin, and when she has found it calls her friends together to rejoice with her. He is the father who does not wait for the prodigal's confession but runs to cast his arms about him and kiss him. He is even the owner of the vineyard who chooses, out of sheer and—to human eyes—even inequitable generosity to pay the eleventh-hour workers as much as those who have borne the labor and heat of the

whole day. And he is the one who sent Jesus to summon "not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Since Jesus Christ is not only the mediator of the message but himself the message, we can learn of God not only from his words but from his deeds. It is therefore not for nothing that we see Jesus healing the sick, giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, casting out devils—and breaking through the conventions of Palestinian Judaism by consorting with publicans and sinners. And it is a revelation of God when we see Jesus suffering, crying out in agony on the Cross in the Psalmist's words: "My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?" and dying in a final gesture of appeal to a world which had rejected him.

Jesus speaks God to us not only by his words about God, his deeds and his sufferings, but by what he was. What he was is only partially disclosed to us in his words. But he does speak of himself as "meek and humble of heart," as the teacher whose yoke is easy and his burden light—surely offering our philosophy unexpected insights on the God whom he reveals. And above all, Jesus is the one who addressed his prayers to his "heavenly Father," and who expressed the uniqueness of his relationship with him as a relationship of sonship. If the supreme revelation of God is one who prayed as a son to his Father, then this tells us something about God himself, who henceforth for Christian believers will be not supremely the Creator, the Lord of history, the Lord of hosts, the Almighty one (though he is all these things) but "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What seems to follow from such reflections is that, for the Christian conscience, the archetypal authority is the authority of a God who is totally generous and absolutely forgiving love, and that this authority, at its supreme moment of self-actualization, is an authority that not only appeals rather than commands, but appeals with the fullness of love. All authority, after all, is the self-presentation not of mere fact but of value to the subject addressed. The authority of truth, for instance, is anything but the brute constraint of fact. Science has no authority over us except in its quality of truth or attempted truth, and the authority of scientists is also an authority of personal and intellectual value. Love, for the Christian, is the supreme value. God is supreme love, and the authority of God is therefore something that comes to us with an appeal analogous to that of love as we know it in its best expressions in our human relations.

No one can constrain another to love him; and any so-called love that was caused by constraint would be less than satisfactory not only to the lover but to the beloved. Love only operates perfectly in perfect freedom. Love is tender and kind and respectful, exigent indeed but with an exigency that is identical with its patience and its respect for the person wooed. God has never made anyone love him without the free consent, involving for adult human beings the possibility of withholding consent, to the offer of God's self-giving that we call grace.

If such is authority in its supreme embodiment and self-disclosure, the very authority of God, it would seem that we have certain lessons to learn about authority in God's Church, the body of Christ who is God self-revealed, self-offered and (if man does not withhold his consent) self-given. We should suppose that authority in the Church is most true to itself when those who wield it speak not in terms of dictation and constraint, but in terms of loving appeal. Constraint limits freedom, and appeal enlarges it. And Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. We should perhaps be a little suspicious of the kind of father-confessor who generally exacts "blind obedience" from his penitents and those who come to him for spiritual direction. We should be happier with the director who spoke in such terms as were used by that lay spiritual director, Baron Friedrich von Hügel:

Religion is indeed authoritative, since only if felt and accepted as not of our making but of God's giving is it religion at all . . . Yes . . . authority is exercised and experienced in and through our human religious sense and conscience . . . Hence . . . you will not for one moment strain or torture yourself, to think or do any of the things here proposed to you. Only in the degree and manner in which, after thinking them well over, in a prayerful and open disposition, they really come home to your mind and really appeal to your own heart and conscience will you quietly accept them and try and work them into your life.¹

A remarkable modern lay thinker writes of authority in what he calls "a religion of appeal." He who wields authority in such a religion should not see himself as

a cog in a system of government but rather as one who helps each of his inferiors in their quest of what is spiritual. He knows that he cannot dictate this quest, nor even teach in a precise way how it should be conducted. So

¹ Letter to a young girl, 11 March 1918, quoted in Joseph P. Whelan, *The Spirituality of Friedrich von Hügel* (London, 1971) pp. 226f.

he exerts his authority with modesty . . . He will be slow to claim that what he prescribes is the will of God . . . He claims no [personal] infallibility, but only a relative competence due to the specially favourable situation in which his office has put him . . . At the final limit, authority would fain be silence and presence; at this term of perfection (never actually attained) authority would act upon man like the living memory of Jesus in the heart of his disciple . . . The wielder of such authority has faith in men, and so he helps his subordinates, by his mode of behaviour among them, to have faith in themselves and in God.²

For a modern example of authority exercised in this way, one could mention the present Pope's recent Exhortation on Devotion to Our Lady.

HUMAN ASPECTS

How comfortable it would be if we could end our discussion of authority and the Christian conscience at this point. But we have been discussing authority in its pure form and in its supreme exercise by God, and suggesting this as a model for the exercise of authority in the Church. The divine Word, however, was vouchsafed to human recipients, and "whatever is received is received according to the modality of the recipient." We have, then, to consider authority not only in itself but as addressing itself to us human beings and to the human groupings in which we find ourselves.

There are two aspects of humanity that seem relevant here. The first is, that man is not a static entity but a creature in progress, a growing creature. The child may indeed be the father of the man, but he does not start as an adult man. The Greek definition of man as a rational animal may be not too misleading when applied to adults, but animality seems to express itself outwardly more clearly than rationality in the very young. Bernard Lonergan has put the point well: we have to acknowledge "the priority of living to learning how to live, to acquiring the willingness to live rightly, to developing the adaptation that makes right living habitual"³ Thus, the immature human is living in a situation that constantly demands more from him than he is capable of supplying; demands an effective reasonableness and rationality that is not yet his. This is particularly important in a consideration

² Marcel Légaut, *Introduction à l'intelligence du passé et de l'avenir du christianisme* (Paris, 1970) pp. 253-255.

³ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (New York, 1957) p. 693.

of authority since pure authority is the self-presentation of some value, be it truth or justice or love or beauty, and until one is adultly rational and reasonable the appeal of value cannot be apprehended in its native essence. It is necessary, to quote the same author, that "the empirically, intelligently, rationally conscious subject of self-affirmation becomes a morally self-conscious subject"⁴ and until that occurs he can hear with his ears the voice, and catch the tones, of authority but he cannot adequately apprehend it in its true nature of appeal. In such circumstances, authority may have to go into alliance with constraint, consenting to a temporary limitation imposed upon the subordinate in order that he may reach the fullness of responsible freedom with a greater range of effective freedom at some later date or in some "absolute Future."

The other relevant aspect of humanity is that, in fact, man is free, even when adult, not to respond to the appeal to authority, and that when he exercises his freedom in such refusal there results what in theology is called sin. Sin is not just a private affair between man and God; it usually has social repercussions and the cumulative effect of sin is to build up a total human situation in which the innocent divagations of immaturity are reinforced in their effects by a positive distortion. In such a situation, and with his reasonableness already weakened by his own sins and the resultant habits, a man is more prone to further sin and less willing to hear the voice of authority.

Indeed, and even before the teachings of revealed religion are brought into the discussion, it seems possible to discern in man a corruption, a tendency to evil, that not only infects the human environment in which we all operate but which will take advantage of that environment to advance further on the downward slope of delinquency.

What, humanly speaking, prevents a total relapse into moral anarchy is what I propose to call social structure. Social structure is the framework for shared living and mutual help, laboriously and always most imperfectly erected by the labors of individuals and groups who are not prepared to sink into worse than barbarism without a struggle.

The late Professor Sir Herbert Butterfield, in his book *Christianity and History*, wrote:

The plain truth is that if you were to remove certain subtle safeguards in society many men who had been respectable all their lives would be transformed . . . ; weak men would apparently take to crime who had been kept on the rails by a certain balance in existing society . . . We do not . . . reflect

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 599.

how precarious our civilised systems will always be, if, almost in absence of mind, we allow certain safeguards to be taken off. The virtues of western society in modern times were in reality the product of much education, tradition and discipline, they needed centuries of patient cultivation. Even without great criminality in anybody — merely by forgetting certain safeguards — we could lose the tolerance and urbanities, the respect for human life and human personality, which are in reality the late blossoms of a highly developed civilisation.⁵

It is in respect of human beings thus subject to the law of development and thus corrupted, in themselves and in their society and culture, by sin that ecclesiastical authority has to be exercised. Without drawing on the resources of constraint it cannot fulfil its task.

The baptized infant is introduced into the life of the Church in the Christian family governed by his Christian parents. The family is, as Vatican II teaches, “a sort of domestic Church” (*Lumen Gentium* n.11), and the child’s parents are his first evangelists. There can be no doubt at all that the controlling spirit of the family should be Christian love, or that an atmosphere of stable and trustworthy love is among the child’s primary needs. There can also be no doubt that the child will not be well brought up unless this caring and forgiving love is allied with constraint. Before the child can learn for himself and decide for himself not to play with fire, the parents must prevent him from doing so and, if disobedience is threatened, fortify their authority with prohibition and, if need be, sanction. Great harm has been done by a theory of the upbringing of children that has deprecated proper family discipline. And the indispensable need for such discipline is in no way diminished by our recognition of the fact that, as the children grow

⁵ Sir Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London, 1954) pp. 45-47. Mary Douglas writes: “[A certain view of society] supposes that people can best work together when hampered by the minimum of institutional rules, separated by no formal distinctions, but only inspired by their commitment to a common aim. Such a theory might do well for disembodied spirits. But humans need their identity made visible and their responsibilities defined. Boundaries and rules enable identities to be established. When they are ambiguous, those caught in ill-defined institutions invariably resort to blame-pinning among themselves . . . In such unstructured institutions [she refers to a particular English university] we invariably find forms of witch-hunting or the tendency to attribute personal blame and accept no responsibility . . . The destruction of good will and of good reputations is as damaging as the destruction of physical property and both are ultimately caused by ill-devised institutions.” Letter to the *London Times*, 2 August 1974.

older, the element of constraint has to give way more and more to an attitude of trust; dictation in the end has to yield to persuasion and to appeal, and this in order that the children may become truly adult. It has been well said that if young people are prevented by constraint from doing what is wrong, they will never learn to do what is right by an act of self-determination. Nevertheless, while autonomy is the ideal to aim at, heteronomy has its place in the developmental process.

In Christ, God is our Father and the Church, as tradition has long proclaimed, is our mother. The Church, from another point of view, is the family of God and within that family there are many who are not yet fully adult in the moral sense, few who are completely adult. There are also many who, though "grown up" in the eyes of the world, are retarded by sin and in need of more help than pure authority can give them. Thus, as in the Christian family, an epitome of the Church, so also in the Church herself we shall expect and shall find an alliance of authority and constraint. The Church will not always speak only in tones of appeal; it will sometimes use the accents of command, indeed of dictation. Obedience thus becomes a Christian virtue.

I should be the last to deny that the element of constraint in the Church has at times been emphasized beyond measure, or that this has had a stunting effect upon the genuine development of Catholics. Constraint has its own dynamism and, although its lawful purposes are to reinforce authority, it can fascinate and corrupt those who wield authority and thus find themselves in possession of the power to constrain. From the era of Constantine onwards the Church has been a powerful structure, sometimes in alliance with the state, and sometimes in confrontation with it. Both confrontation and collaboration have tended to strengthen the element of constraint in the Church. And, because the Church is habitually concerned with her own survival and influence in society, there has been a tendency for the Church's authority and power to constrain to take their stand in support of the political and social status quo against movements for reform and even revolution in which the real seeds of a happier future for mankind may have lain concealed.

No such historical facts, however, suffice to make the alliance of authority and constraint in itself illegitimate. The recent ecumenical council has emphasised the genuine Christian character of authority and was relatively silent about the legitimacy of constraint. In conse-

quence, there have developed anarchical elements within the Church and these, if they increase, could be dangerous.

Authority in the Church is further suffering from the difficulty experienced by those who wield it in adjusting their activities and their administration to the spirit of the Council. The habits engendered by long centuries of what today we should call authoritarianism are not easily discarded. Yet the documents of Vatican II are open to inspection by any interested Christian; and any discrepancy between the performance of officials and the spirit of these documents inevitably produces what today is recognized as a crisis of authority. It is far too simple to explain this crisis as due to a culpable diminution of respect for legitimate authority. The fact is that when authority speaks with one voice in the Council and with another voice in its day-to-day performances after the Council, the faithful find it difficult to determine where their duty of obedience lies. In the result, the Church finds herself passing through a dangerous and unhappy stage of her existence. Authority is of her essence; and constraint is a necessary ally of authority in this fallen and developing world. But authority, deriving its status from God, yet depends for its efficacy on a measure of consent from the faithful. Precisely that measure of consent is diminished by our present difficulties.

RESOURCES OF RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM

Perhaps, then, the time has come for us to turn our attention once again from authority to its correlative, responsible freedom. What resources does responsible freedom find within itself to render aid to the Church during such an abnormal period as that through which we are now passing?

First of all, the mature Christian must remind himself that authority in the Church is a derivation from the divine authority incarnate in Jesus Christ; and in its own nature it follows that ecclesiastical authority expects the sort of response that Christ himself called for, and not a different kind of response such as we might associate with a human monarch or legislative assembly.

Secondly, it must be borne in mind that authority is not located exclusively in the Pope and the bishops and in those who have received delegation from them. The authority of Christ in the Church is as extensive and as multifarious as the life of Christ in his mystical body.

AUTHORITY AND THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

Thus there is a kind of authority appertaining to theology and sound scholarship, despite the fact that theologians do not constitute an ordained ministry in the Church. There is, as we have seen, a real authority of parents in respect of their young children, an authority that is, in the case of Christian parents, more than the natural authority of parents, since in a Christian home the parents represent the authority of the Church herself. There is also the undoubted authority of the Christian teacher in a Christian school; and, in general, the authority of elders in respect of their juniors.

It should be noted that the diffused and "unofficial" authority of which we are here speaking is not confined to matters of practical discipline, but extends to the sphere of Christian doctrinal and theological teaching. Despite a modern unfortunate use of the word *magisterium* to designate the bishops, the college of bishops, and the Pope, magisterial authority is not confined in the Church to official magisterial authority. It cannot reasonably be maintained, in the face of Vatican II, that the Church is divided into an *ecclesia docens* consisting of the Pope and the bishops and an *ecclesia discens* embracing all other baptized persons. On the contrary, everyone in the Church, from the Pope downwards, belongs to the "learning Church" and has to receive information from his fellow-believers; and everyone in the Church who has reached maturity has, at some time or another, to play the role of the teacher, the *magister*, the *ecclesia docens*.

What, then, is the special function of official authority in the Church?

The Church can usefully be seen as a "communion" or fellowship of believers. The notion of communion, in its full sense, includes that of a system of inter-personal relationships. This system, in Christianity, is built upon the sacraments and above all on the Eucharist. It is in common Eucharistic worship that relationship between Christian believers reaches its high point and finds its focus. Already in the Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch the bishop is seen as at once the minister of the Eucharist and the personal focus of the local Church as a communion.

Local unity, however, vital as it is, does not exhaust the idea of unity, and therefore of fellowship or communion, in the Church. While from one point of view the Church only becomes fully and existentially actual in the (necessarily local) Eucharistic celebration, from another point of view the local Church has validity only as a local expression of the universal Church, the one catholic, covenantal People of God.

Hence, the role of the local bishop for his own local Church has to be taken in conjunction with his role as a personal link between his own local Church and the universal communion. And already very clearly in St. Cyprian of Carthage's writings we see the notion of the worldwide "college" of bishops not only adumbrated but given great prominence and an essential role. Subsequent development of theology answered the question how the college of bishops can be more than a mere "number" of individual bishops by combining the notion of an episcopal college with that of the primacy of the See of Rome as the focus of the college.

Can we not therefore say that a special function of official authority in the Church, that authority that belongs inherently to Pope and college of bishops and derivatively to those to whom Pope or bishops delegate authority, is to preserve and promote the local and universal unity or communion of the People of God? This unity is not a mere sociological value but belongs to the heart of our religion, since the Church which is the body of Christ is part of the one mystery of salvation.

The preservation and promotion of unity are the grounds of the disciplinary authority of bishops and Pope. A community is only really such if it has a measure of organization, and the disciplinary acts of official authority are (in their proper use) designed to sustain this organization. The Christian conscience will in principle acknowledge this authority and will direct the individual's behavior to conformity with it. Here, however, it is important to realize that this disciplinary authority is truest to its own ideal when it can and does use the accents not of command but of appeal and exhortation. But because the People of God is made up of individuals who are in various stages of development towards maturity, official Church authority can rightly ally itself with constraint, denying — for example — the full rights of communion to those who pertinaciously behave in ways contrary to the values of communion.

Official Church authority has also a doctrinal role. For the People of God is built both on faith, in its primordial sense of openness and surrender to the basic invitation of God self-revealed, and on those beliefs in which the content of faith, or its revealed "object," is articulated. These beliefs, as they are in their subjective aspect, are at the same time doctrines in the objective order and it needs no long argument to show that heterodoxy is fatal to communion. Thus, the unitive

role of Church authority has a doctrinal component and expresses itself and its function in what modern theology calls dogma.

Dogma, therefore, has authority over the Christian conscience. And if it be asked how I can be bound to believe doctrines or dogmas which do not commend themselves to me by their intrinsic force but only by their official character, it must be replied that without such doctrine the Church as a communion of believers could not survive, and that therefore the authority of dogma is derivatively the authority of God self-revealed in the Christian mystery.

Only when the position I have just outlined has been accepted can we profitably turn our attention to certain qualifications that have been brought into prominence in very recent discussions of authority and undoubtedly require consideration.

CERTAIN QUALIFICATIONS

In the first place, then, the divine guarantee of doctrine appertains, in its fullest sense, only to those doctrines and dogmas to which the Church has fully committed herself, whether by the common consent of her believers (the *sensus fidelium*) or by the decisions of official authority. The claim of these doctrines on the adhesion of the believer is identical with the claim of the divine revelation itself. To require the same adhesion for doctrines that are indeed taught by officials with authority but to which the Church has not irrevocably committed herself is to abuse authority; and if this requirement is accompanied by threatened sanctions it is also to abuse the power of constraint. It would seem that, in order to preserve clearly the distinction between irrevocable and provisional doctrinal decisions, the word "assent" should be confined to the type of adhesion properly required for irrevocable doctrinal decisions.

Secondly, theology cannot fail to take account of the contingent character of all linguistic expression. There is no such thing as "timeless English"—or, for that matter, of "timeless Latin." Except in mathematics and in the sciences so far as they express themselves in mathematical language, it is hardly too much to say that language is continually modified in the very process of its use. In particular, the Church's dogmas have often been expressed in language which reflected certain limited fields of theological or juridical interest or which was tributary to a philosophy that cannot claim to be part of the revealed deposit of Christian truth. In principle, then, it is always pos-

sible to distinguish between the intended meaning of a doctrinal formula and the contingent elements in its linguistic expression. Strictly speaking, the official teaching office of the Church does not define a formula; it defines a truth with the help of a formula. The truth is irreformable; the formula may be such as, in a different stage of linguistic development, to be positively misleading. It has long been admitted that the understanding of the biblical documents demands both exegesis and hermeneutics. The same admission needs to be made about the doctrinal formulae of the Church.

These qualifications with respect to the teachings of ecclesiastical authority have their importance for the Christian conscience. The object of Christian faith is God, divine truth, self-disclosed in the Christian mystery, which is at one and the same time the mystery of Christ Jesus and the mystery of the Church his body. The divine revelation is the content of the faith of the Church as a communion or community and, in consequence, of the faith of the individual believer. This revelation has the supreme authority of God, for it is the revelation of God in Christ. The Christian is thus led by his conscience to assent to this revelation both in its global wholeness and in those articulations of it that have in their support the *sensus fidei* or the irrevocable self-commitment of the Church through the solemn definitions of the official teaching authority within it. Such assent is to be seen not as a constraint upon the freedom of thought of the believer but as an expression of his responsible freedom and as his mode of access to the enriching values of revealed truth.

We have already agreed that official teaching is not confined to these solemn and irrevocable definitions. There is what is known today as the "ordinary magisterium"—of which the non-definitive teaching of ecumenical councils may be taken as an illustration. The two Vatican Councils themselves have, in this non-definitive way, taught that some doctrines of the ordinary magisterium can call for the assent of faith; but this is an area in which we lack the guidance of good theology today. Other non-definitive but official teaching cannot properly claim the assent of faith, but will be received by the Christian conscience with that respect that is due to the considered actions and utterances of those in positions of legitimate and official authority. In all cases, the mood of the devout believer will be not resentment at what appears to be a constraint upon his thinking, but a welcoming gratitude that goes along with the keen alertness of a critical mind and of a good will