

Note on
Peter in the New Testament

The motif for this brief essay comes from the Venice statement on Authority, n. 24:

Claims on behalf of the Roman see as commonly presented in the past put a greater weight on the Petrine texts (Mt., 16:18; Lk 22:31-32; J., 21:15-17) than they are generally thought to be able to bear. However, many Roman Catholic scholars do not now feel it necessary to stand by former exegesis of these texts in every respect.

In the following pages we will look at the Petrine texts as used in Roman documents since Vatican Council I; secondly, we will see how these texts have been understood in the theological community; thirdly, we will suggest some pointers to an eventual agreement.

I

The Petrine texts held a prominent place in the Constitution Pastor aeternus of Vatican Council I. In connection with the institution of an apostolic primacy in St Peter, treated in chapter I of the constitution, the council cited John 1:42, Mt 16:16-19, John 21:15. It stated that the denial of a Petrine primacy is clearly opposed "to this so clear doctrine of the sacred Scriptures as it has always been understood by the Catholic Church" (D.-S., 3054). Thus the council considered the meaning of these texts to be clear, at least as it has been interpreted in the Catholic tradition. Yet it is noteworthy that the council cites no scriptural text in support of the perpetuity of the Petrine primacy in the Roman Pontiffs (ch. 2), or in support of the nature of the Roman primacy (ch. 3).

In relation to papal infallibility (ch. 5), two texts are quoted. Mt 16:18 is used indirectly, as included in a quotation from the Formula of Hormisdas (523), attributed here to the 4th council of Constantinople (869-870).¹ Luke 22:32 is quoted directly. The incidental manner in which these texts are used shows that, despite what some later theologians have claimed,² Vatican I did not attempt to define the literal sense of these texts. It argued from them as commonly, though not universally, interpreted in the Roman Catholic theological tradition. One may assume that the oath against Modernism (1910) gave the Roman understanding of the Petrine texts and of their relevance for the authority of the Roman Pontiff in the following passage: firma pariter fide credo Ecclesiam, verbi relevati custodem et magistram, per ipsum verum atque historicum Christum, cum apud nos degeret, proxime ac directo institutam, eandemque super Petrum, apostolicae hierachiae principem, ejusque in aevum successores oedificatam (D. - S., n. 3540). On June 19, 1911, the Biblical Commission, expressing the Roman mind, declared the opinion, that the "historical authenticity" of Mt 16:17-19 is doubtful, to be without "solid foundation".

The Petrine texts appear in good place at Vatican Council II. The schema De ecclesia, composed by the Theological Commission during the preparatory phase of the council, used only one Petrine text, Luke 22:32 in reference to the magisterium of the Roman Pontiff (cap. VII: De Ecclesiae Magisterio, n. 30).³ But in the De ecclesia finally endorsed by the council, the desire to use biblical language wherever possible led to a more frequent recourse to the Petrine texts. John 21:17 is featured in ch. 3, n.8; Matthew 16:18 in n. 19; John 21:15ff, and again Matthew 16:18-19 in n.22,

supported also by Matthew 18:18 and 28:16-20. In these nn. 19 and 22, the texts are applied directly to Peter only. Yet it seems to be assumed that they also throw light on the Roman Pontiff, since the council speaks of the Roman Pontiff as "the successor of Peter, the vicar of Christ and the visible head of the entire Church". (n. 18).

Outside the Vatican Council, some Petrine texts have also been featured in other Roman documents. For instance, in the encyclical Ecclesiam suam (1964), Paul VI states that the Church, compared by Jesus Christ himself to a building, "is founded upon a man who is by nature weak and frail, yet who is changed by Christ into a firm rock, which by God's wonderful gift will never fail: on this rock I will build my Church." Less directly, the declaration Mysterium ecclesiae, issued on June 24, 1973, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, alludes to the Petrine passages when speaking of "the successors of Peter and of the other Apostles."⁴ This discretion in the use of the biblical image of Peter is all the more remarkable as the declaration has the doctrine of infallibility as its topic.

II

The Petrine texts have to be seen, not only as used and interpreted in official Roman documents, but also as their meaning is debated in the theological community. Here, a conflict opposes two tendencies among theologians and exegetes concerning the Petrine texts.

For what may be called the classical Roman Catholic interpretation, the Petrine passages apply explicitly to Peter and implicitly to the bishops of Rome, who continue Peter's function in the Church. This understanding of Scripture has been constant in Rome itself since Leo I (440-461). But Leo had not invented it; and it goes back in part to some of his predecessors,

such as Sixtus III (432-440), Zosimus (417-418), Siricius (384-399), Damasus (366-384).⁵ It may be debated whether the papal application of the Petrine texts was then believed to represent the literal meaning of Scripture or a spiritual hermeneutics of the sacred text. In any case, this would have made little practical difference, since spiritual exegesis was held to be a valid way of reading the Scriptures.

Undoubtedly, the classical Roman interpretation was never fully accepted outside Rome. Although not unwilling to use similar rhetoric on occasion, the Eastern bishops never considered that to be the only correct or full sense of the Scriptural passages.⁶ In the West, the Roman doctrine became universal in the early scholastic period, after considerable opposition in Carolingian times.⁷ In the later Middle Ages, the conciliarist movement, while usually not denying the papal sense of the Petrine texts, drew different conclusions from it as to the relative authority of the bishop of Rome, the Council, the College of Cardinals, and the Church as the universal congregation of the faithful. During the Counter-Reformation, several movements, such as Gallicanism, Josephism, some forms of Jansenism (Synod of Pistoia, 1786) prolonged or revived the conciliarist hesitancy as to the implications of the Roman exegesis of the Petrine texts.

In broad generalization, one may say that the deviant exegeses of these scriptural passages have understood them of bishops in general, Peter being the model of all bishops, or have applied Mt., 16:18-19, not to Peter himself, but to his faith, thus seeing Peter as a paradigm for all the faithful. Anglican thought has generally interpreted Mt., 16:18 in accordance with the Midrash on Isaiah 51:1-2, in which Abraham is called "rock": Peter and primarily his faith are seen, analogously to Abraham and his faith,

as the foundation on which the church is built. No special, personal office is given to Peter, for the church as the household of God is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph., 2:20) Anglicans generally have not understood Mt., 16:19 as describing any unique power or mediation given to Peter, for the same power is directly given by Christ to all the apostles in Mt., 18:18.⁸

The Malines Conversations saw the promises of Mt. 18:16-19 as made to Peter, but as fulfilled in the Twelve, so that any extension of these to the later church had to include all the bishops and not only the bishop of Rome.⁹

Vatican Council I marked a victory of the Roman interpretation, defended by the ultramontanes. But the victory was not final, for a different kind of exegesis, already largely accepted in the Protestant world, was just about to enter the Catholic schools themselves. Already the Reformation had, in principle, though not in consistent practise, abandoned spiritual exegesis in order to focus on the literal meaning of the Scriptures. With the scientific study of the Bible, new approaches to the Petrine texts brought into question: their authenticity; if authentic, their proper place in Jesus's ministry before or after the resurrection; if unauthentic, their place of origin in Jerusalem, Antioch or elsewhere; their textual integrity (are they compilations, interpolations or what?); their ties with eschatology, itself understood in divergent ways, as realized, imminent, futuristic; and of course their meaning for the early Church and their relevance for later times. The solutions to these problems, which vary considerably, cannot be summarized here.¹⁰ But, in the light of the scientific study of the texts, it is now generally recognized that

the classical Roman interpretation was more eisegesis than exegesis. Whether this eisegesis can be theologically justified is a question for systematic theology; it depends on what is considered to be proper theological methodology.

III

Granted that the position of the Petrine texts in contemporary scholarship remains open to question from many sides, one may suggest the following points as hopeful stepping stones to an agreement.

1. Whether the Petrine texts, and especially Matthew 16:18, come from Jesus or from the primitive communities, they do witness to an early Christian tradition that Peter held a unique place among the first disciples and already during Jesus's ministry. Among the significant items, one may mention: the call of Simon to follow Jesus, the change of his name to Cephas, his being named first among the Twelve, his appearing to be first in a smaller circle of three (Peter, James, John) or four (Andrew being the fourth, Mk 13:3), his confession of Jesus's messiahship (Mt 16:16) or of Jesus as the Holy One of God (J. 6:69), the fact that Jesus pays the Temple tax for him (Mt 17:24-27), his expression of love for Jesus and his mission of "feeding the sheep" (J., 21:16-18). One should also add the passages of the Acts of the Apostles about Peter's leadership, especially Acts, 1:15ff. where Peter is the first to proclaim the gospel to the Jews, and Acts, 10:47-48, where he is the first to open the Christian community to the Gentiles, and the passages in Paul which recognize Peter's leadership, especially the mention of Cephas as first in a list of the apparitions of the risen Jesus (I Cor., 15:5).

2. The semitic character of the language of Matthew 16:18-19 marks it out as an early text presumably of Judeo-Christian redaction made in aramaic-speaking circles, and therefore not as a late interpolation.¹¹ While this

redaction may have been related in some way to the conflict about the Judaizers, its aramaic background suggests that the identity of Cephas should be understood in keeping with the semitic concept of corporate personality. Cephas may designate more than the man Simon-Cephas, as Adam, whether the first or the second, is more than the man Adam or the man Jesus. What this wider personality can be depends on what is understood by the ecclesiam meam of Mt., 16:18: is it the small group of the disciples, identified as the remnant gathered around Jesus in the expectation of the parousia? or is it also the Church of later ages, destined to last until the distant end of the world?

3. In any case, and whatever the original perspective in which the Petrine texts were composed, it is not illegitimate theologically to interpret in their light the later history of the Church and of the Roman primacy. Without arguing from them in favor of later developments, one should regard the scriptural image of Peter as paradigmatic for all ministry, and especially for the episcopal ministry, of which the papal ministry is conceived, in the Roman Catholic tradition, to be a particular instance. In this case, the corporate personality of Cephas in the Petrine texts should make it impossible to view the Roman primacy in isolation from the ministry of all the bishops and from that of the whole Church; it should help to promote a collegial exercise of the primacy.

IV

Conclusion

Given the present state of the question concerning the Petrine texts of the New Testament, the Catholic and the Anglican communions are not divided over their interpretation. For no consensus exists for the moment on how these texts should be understood in their original setting. And, whatever theory one may prefer as to this setting and the meaning of the texts, no singular interpretation of them can suffice to prove or to disprove the Roman Catholic position about papal primacy and papal infallibility. The debate should therefore be shifted to other than scriptural grounds. 12

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1. Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta, Basle, 1962, p. 133; Denzinger-Sch., n. 363; cf Mansi, XVI, p.27-28.
2. Cf Joseph A. Burgess: A History of the Exegesis of Matthew 16:17-19 from 1781 to 1965, Ann Arbor, 1976, p. 95-97.
3. Schemata constitutionum et decretorum. Series secunda, Vatican City, 1962, p. 47-48.
4. Ecclesiam suam, Vatican City, 1964, p. 20-21; Mysterium ecclesiae, in Documentation catholique, n. 1636, July 15, 1973, p. 665.
5. Arthur Carol Piepkorn: The Roman Primacy in the Patristic Era: from Nicaea to Leo the Great, in Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, V: Papal Primacy and the Universal Church, Minneapolis, 1974, p. 73-97.
6. Jean Meyendorff et al.: The Primacy of Peter, London, 1963. On recent Orthodox views of the Petrine texts, see Burgess, op. cit., p. 78-80; 123-126; 155-157.
7. George H. Tavard: The Papacy in the Middle Ages, in Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, V, p. 98-105; Episcopacy and Apostolic Succession according to Hincmar of Reims (Theological Studies, December 1973, p. 594-623).
8. See - among many other texts -- the discussion of the Petrine passages in Charles Gore: The Reconstruction of Belief, Book III: The Holy Spirit and the Church, London, 1951, p. 665-671.
9. Burgess, op. cit., p. 159-160; Jacques de Bivort de la Saudée: Documents sur le Problème de l'Union Anglo-Romaine (1921-1927), Paris, 1949, especially Armitage Robinson: La position de saint Pierre dans l'Eglise primitive, p. 95-96; Dr Kidd: L'emploi des textes relatifs à saint Pierre jusque vers 461, p. 109-117; Mémoire en réponse à Mgr Van Roey, p. 167-174.

10. See Burgess, op. cit.; Raymond Brown et al.: Peter in the New Testament, Minneapolis, 1973; the article, Peter, in John L. McKenzie: Dictionary of the Bible, Milwaukee, 1965, p. 663-666.
11. On Mt., 16:16-19, see Peter in the New Testament, p. 83-101.
12. This further topic is outside the scope of the present note. But one may indicate several lines of thought, which do not rest on any specific interpretation of the Petrine texts: Avery Dulles's moderate understanding of infallibility (Papal Authority in Roman Catholicism, in Peter McCord, ed.: A Pope for all Christians ? New York, 1976, p. 48-70); or the contributions of Gregory Baum, Richard McBrien and Harry McSorley, in The Infallibility Debate, New York, 1971; or George Tavard's symbolic approach (The Papacy and Christian Symbolism, in Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 1976, n. 3, p. 345-358; Is the Papacy an Object of Faith ? in One in Christ, 1977, p. 220-228).