SOME NOTES ON "TEACHING AUTHORITY AND INFALLIBILITY IN THE CHURCH"

(Theological Studies, March, 1979).

(1) N.2, p.114 ad fin: Pius XII on the assent of Catholics.

The word "assent" here causes real difficulty.   To assent to a statement
in the indicative mood (e.g. the statement: "The whole human race is
descended from a single human couple") is to accept the statement as true.
It is an act of the intellect and it involves that one believes the
statement to be true.   But if a statement is not self-evidencing, one
needs to know the grounds on which its truth can be accepted.   A non-
infallible papal definition is ex hypothesi insufficient grounds for
such acceptance.   I would prefer to avoid the word, assent, in such
circumstances and to speak, e.g. of "religiosum obsequium", cf.
Vatican II.

(2) N.6, p.117: "in contrast to 'the men of old'".

Is it not probable that Matthew means by "it was said to them of old":
"God said to the men of old".   i.e. Are we not here presented with the
Jewish use of the passive voice to refer to an act of God?

(3) N.9.   The Gospel "took shape".

Since later on it is admitted that there is a distinction between the
gospel and every human expression of it, this form of words is unfor-
tunate.

(4) N.16: "Infallibility is not a New Testament term".

The closest etymological Greek equivalent of infalliblitas is asphaleia
(the root, fall, is presumably identical with the root of sphall; in
and a are negativing prefixes).   Asphaleia is used in Luke's Prologue
("that you may know the asphaleia of the things in which you have been
instructed").   It is also used in Acts 5:23 of a prison "locked up in
all security), and in Thess. 5:3: "When they say, Peace and asphaleia).
For asphales see its 3 occurrences in Acts, where in each case it means
"something definite" or "certain", and in Phil. 3:1 ("giving security"?),
Hewbrews 6:19: "an anchor of the soul which is firm and asphales".   The
adverb asphalos occurs thrice in the NT, meaning: without fail, for
certain, securely.   And the verb asphalizo occurs 4 times, meaning
"make secure", literally.   Thus the asphal. words might support an
interpretation of infallibilitas as = sure reliability.

(5) N.18: "Gained special importance" - and cf. the two closing sentences
     of n.17.

To say that the see of Rome gained special importance is question-begging.

(1) The primacy of the Roman see, evidenced in the affair of the Asian
Quartodecimans as interpreted by Eusebius, would be bound to have doctrinal
implications whenever Rome required doctrinal conformity as the price of
communion, via Rome, with the universal Church.

(2) What is of course true is that evidence for the special doctrinal
importance of Rome is exiguous in the early centuries - but so is so
much else that interests us; we have to rely on data that history
happens to have preserved for us, and this depends to a certain extent
on what interested Christians in those years of persecution.   But one
should not pass by without consideration the text of Irenaeus on the
subject, disputed though its exegesis is.   Nor should one overlook the

fact noted by B.J. Kidd, I think, that early "heretics" flocked to Rome
to try to secure sanction for their theories there. Batiffol is not a
safe guide on the term, cathedra Petri. The mention of "some Roman
emperors" is sudden and odd in this context; and it can be argued that
the emperors were only reflecting Christian views. One might surely
have mentioned Augustine's causa finita est, if not other texts and data.

(6) N.19: "challenges to such claims" --

But of course authority is always being challenged. What is the evidence
for saying that "Eastern Christians regarded Rome as one of several ..."?
Of course it was one of several: but wasn't it the one that was of
paramount importance? Again, one would want to know what "papal decisions"
were challenged by Western metropolitans, and in what circumstances (I take
it we are not talking about abusive operations of the primacy in non-
doctrinal matters?). That a Pope might "deviate from the faith" is a
fact that constat in Catholic theology; the question is whether a Pope
can "define", under conditions laid down by Vatican I, and yet be found,
in this definition, to be espousing error. This paragraph would have
been more satisfactory if it had pin-pointed the quasi-ecumenical occasions
when the doctrinal primacy of the Roman see was the issue. One could
mention the Council of Ephesus, whose members acknowledge themselves to
be "constrained" (epeichthentes) by that see; the Council of Chalcedon,
whose Acts were inoperative till Rome confirmed them; the end of the
Acacian Schism, made possible by the acceptance by the Eastern bishops
that it was necessary to be in communion with Rome, etc.; and the seventh
Ecumenical Council (second of Nicaea) in which it was stated, apparently
without contradiction, that no council could be regarded as ecumenical
unless it had the approbation or consent of Rome. These examples are not
from theological theorising but from the official history of the Church at
its topmost (institutional) level.

Cf. also the statement in N.20: "Roman bishops from the fourth century on
regarded their "confirmation" etc." The list I have given above suggests
that it wasn't only "Roman bishops" who held this view. (That external
help was needed for the enforcement of Roman decisions is hardly relevant.
Even today the attitude of the secular arm in China has made it impossible
for Rome to have its decisions "enforced" in that country). Note, also in
N.20, the statement about "the growing practice of appealing to Rome";
what is meant is that evidence for such a practice becomes more abundant --
the argumentum ex silentio is here, as so often dangerous.

(7) N.32: "Definitions".

When this word is used by Vatican I (or definire) is a verbal formulation meant,
or an act of intellectual judgment which the Pope endeavours to clothe in
the words of a formula? Today it seems to be admitted that formulas are
not irreformable; but is this admission unfaithful to Vatican I? I suggest
that definire means "to settle an issue", not the formula in which the
decision is communicated.

(8) N.33(d).

We can be sure that assent to an infallible definition will not be lacking.
But the reverse is also true: when such assent is lacking, we can be sure
that there was some defect in the actualisation of the conditions laid down
by Vatican I -- i.e. sure that the "definition" in question is not certainly
an infallible definition. Thus reception by the People of God becomes also
a criterion.

(9) "No second source".

For me, this matter is still sub judice -- I would not wish to be counted
among the adherents of the sola scriptura thesis.

(10) N.31.   "Only two".

But when a Pope confirms the "infallible" teaching of a general council,
is he not both playing his part as a bishop among bishops and exercising
his papal infallibility?

Additional Note:

As usual, the argument limps because there is not yet agreement about the
identification and limits of the Church.   If the Church has received the
permanent gift (presupposing the assistance of the Holy Spirit) of visible
unity, then this should reflect back upon our evaluation of the historical
evidences, e.g. of the "developments" of papal primacy and papal doctrinal
authority.   If visible unity, in the shape of full intercommunion between
all its local expressions, is not a permanent gift of God to his Church,
then I doubt whether we can find reliable criteria anywhere for the
articulation of the Tradition.   One realises that it could have been
most imprudent to treat De Ecclesia at an earlier stage in the dialogue;
but ahsn't the time now come when attention should be directed to it?

B C Butler

Bishop B.C. Butler.
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