

PAPAL AUTHORITY - SOME PROBLEMS FOR NON-ROMAN CATHOLICS

by

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Despite the high regard which many non-Roman Catholics have for the popes of this generation and for the marked influence for good that the papacy has in the modern world, the thought of living under papal authority as it is at present understood and exercised presents real difficulties for those Christians whose structures of authority are not those of the Roman Church. Some fear the loss of intellectual liberty (they will quote a list of 'martyrs' from Galileo to Teilhard de Chardin), others the loss of a true freedom of conscience (they will instance the recent crisis over the encyclical Humanae Vitae). What may well underlie these fears is the suspicion that to be a Roman Catholic involves a wholehearted assent to the dogmatic formulae in which the faith and moral life of the Roman Catholic Christian is expressed; and that should a non-Roman Catholic living in a united church under papal authority fail to assent to any one of these formulae, he will fall under some kind of condemnation (e.g. as a priest he could be refused permission to teach, as a layman, if he falls out of line on a moral issue, he could be refused absolution and therefore be barred from communion). In other words, if he cannot fit what seems to him a Procrustean bed of dogmatic definitions, he had better sleep elsewhere.

No Christian of course considers that he can believe what he likes or behave as he likes. A Christian, for example, who denied the doctrine of the Trinity and the necessity of the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist for salvation would be as out of place in the Anglican church as he would in the Roman church; just as a Christian living in adultery or habitually stealing from his employer could not really be described as an active member of the body of Christ. This however is not really the non-Catholic worry. What distracts non-Roman Christians is the impression given by certain statements in Roman Catholic literature that Christian faith means assent to propositions - in other words 'belief that....' - whereas he might be more inclined to describe his faith either in terms of commitment and response to God's revelation of Himself in Christ or possibly as a mode of apprehension of the living God. Propositions and dogmatic formulae thus become descriptive or analytic of this primary experience of Christians in the church of both the past and the present, and are not as such 'objects of faith'. So too among such propositions there is a legitimate variety according to the changing cultural and intellectual climate; there is, that is to say, no one proposition that will serve for all time, to express one aspect of Christian truth.

My proposal in this paper is two fold. First that this view of the Roman Catholic notion of faith (as being primarily assent to propositions) is basically mistaken; and that the true Roman Catholic position needs greater publicity in any dialogue on authority. Second that a common expression by Roman Catholics and Anglicans on what they mean by faith could relieve some tensions in the current debate between the two communions on authority; for if faith is the gift of God and the means whereby we apprehend Him in His mysteries, then the propositions by which man gives expression to his awareness of transcendence should be given their due importance and neither under - nor overvalued.

1. Mistaken judgements of the Roman Catholic view of Faith

In the second edition of John Hick's Faith and Knowledge (1966) a new chapter is added on 'the classic Thomist view of faith as a propositional attitude'. The author's thesis is that faith, according to St. Thomas and to many a Roman Catholic writer after him is '(a) intellectualist, in that it regards faith as a propositional attitude (i.e. assent to propositions), (b) fideistic, in that it regards faith and knowledge as mutually exclusive; and (c) voluntaristic, in that it sees faith as the product of a conscious act of the will.' It is of his first proposition that the main criticism must be made (though the second two are equally open to serious questioning). He quotes in support of this the First Vatican Council (Denzinger 1792) on 'the object of faith' which is defined as 'all those things...which are contained in the written word of God and in tradition, and those which are proposed by the Church, either in a solemn pronouncement or in her ordinary and universal teaching power, to be believed as divinely revealed'. He might well have added from the catechism in a contemporary Mass book the statement, often repeated 'We are bound to believe that.....'

My first criticism is that it is remarkable that Hick does not use the language of St. Thomas in his analysis. St. Thomas after all distinguishes between the formal and material objects of faith (not between 'the ultimate' and 'immediate' objects of faith). The formal object for St. Thomas is God ("the first truth"), the material object those things we believe about God only because they relate to God and help us on our journey towards the enjoyment of God. (ST II IIa q.1 art. 1.) My second criticism concerns his failure to make a proper exegesis of the reply of St. Thomas 'cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis'. (loc.cit.art2). For St. Thomas God, the formal object of faith, is simple; but we being merely human tend to know the truth 'by synthesis and analysis' and this mode of knowledge is inevitably complex. Hence 'on the part of the believer, and in this respect the object of faith is something complex by way of a proposition'. (loc.cit.) Which is frankly correct in sense for any human act of knowing God involves us in the necessary complexities of words, images, formulae etc. until (as St. Thomas is careful to point out) we attain to the beatific vision when we shall 'see Him as He is'. 'Hence that vision', he continues, 'will not be by way of a proposition, but by way of simple understanding'. How Hick can go on to say, in the light of this that 'at every point...faith is concerned with propositions', is to me incredible. Further St. Thomas in art. 6 (to which Hick refers) is merely justifying the division of our analysis of our apprehension of the First Truth into articles (which as St. Isidore says are 'glimpses of Divine truth, tending thereto') and is not proposing these articles as any more than the material object of faith as defined above; and in art. 9 he is further justifying the collection of these articles into a creed 'so that it (the truth of the faith) might more easily be proposed to all lest anyone might stray from the truth through ignorance of the faith'. St. Thomas in neither of these is exalting the material over the formal; he simply understands the pastoral necessity of using the necessary analysis of propositional statements which are native to the human intellect to lead men to the ultimate object of their supernatural destiny i.e. to God himself. Hick seems to miss all these nuances in St. Thomas; which is part of the danger of reading a book as if it were a mere academic exercise instead of as what it really is i.e. a treatise on spirituality.

More must now be said of Hick's appeal to the decree 'Dei Filius...' (cit. supra.) in substantiation of his thesis concerning Thomist-catholic views of faith. The context of both Hick's quotation and of the Decree itself is here important (and neglected by Hick). Bernard Lonergan (Method in Theology pp. 320 ff.) shows first that the 'thrust' of the final chapter (ch.4) 'was directed against a rationalism that considered mysteries non-existent, that proposed to demonstrate the dogmas, that defended scientific conclusions opposed to church doctrines, that claimed the church had no right to pass judgement on scientific views, and that granted science the competence to reinterpret the church's dogmas'; and that further 'to deal with such rationalism the council had distinguished (1) the natural light of reason (2) faith, (3) reason illumined by faith and (4) reason operating beyond its competence.' Of particular interest for our understanding of faith and its relation to dogma is Lonergan's analysis of the last section of chapter 4 and the corresponding canon. In response to those who would maintain that human reason may so investigate the 'doctrine of faith' as if it were 'some kind of philosophic discovery to be perfected by human talent' the decree maintains that it is 'a divine deposit delivered to the spouse of Christ to be guarded faithfully and declared infallibly'. And further (which is of most significance for us) 'there is ever to be retained the meaning sensus) of the sacred dogmas that once was declared by the church 'nec unquam ab eo sensu altioris intelligentiae specie et nomine recendum'. As St Vincent of Lerins observes (who is quoted in this chapter), there may be an increase in understanding, but the underlying meaning of the dogma always remains the same - 'in suo dumtaxat genere, in eodem scilicet dogmate, eodem sensu, eademque sententia'. What is permanent therefore is the 'meaning' though the meaning cannot be 'without verbal formulation'; which is believed is the truth which is God's revelation of himself; the verbal form in which it is clothed may vary though each variety must be seen to clothe the same truth. Lonergan expresses this as follows:

'Truths can be revealed in one culture and preached in another. They may be revealed in the styles and fashion of one differentiation of consciousness (cf. St. Thomas cit supra loc.cit.) defined by the church in the style and fashion of another differentiation, and understood by theologians in a third. What permanently is true is the meaning of the dogma in the context in which it was defined..... The permanence of the dogmas, then results from the fact that they express revealed mysteries. Their historicity on the other hand results from the facts that (1) statements have meanings only in their contexts and (2) contexts are ongoing and ongoing contexts are multiple'.

It can scarcely be concluded from this that Roman Catholics are required in the act of faith to assent to a formula or proposition 'tout court'. Rather they are asked to respond to divine revelation which, on account of the complexity of the human understanding is invariably (in this life) associated with some verbal proposition. But the proposition is only the vehicle for the truth. For example, St. Cyril of Jerusalem may have expressed his dislike for the term 'homousios' but he nonetheless believed the truth which it expressed (and was able to indicate as much by his concession to the term at the Council of Constantinople). Similarly Anglicans may fight shy of the term 'transubstantiation' but at the same time it has been demonstrated (e.g. in the Windsor Statement) that they are able to accept the meaning of the term though this meaning is expressed by means of an

alternative kind of differentiation.

Finally it should be said that in no sense can christians be either tied to the contexts of the past nor to any one contemporary context in their propositional formulation of the content of their faith in God. On the other hand the christian of the 20th century can scarcely claim to have it in his power to correct or radically alter the truth revealed by God and apprehended by an earlier generation; any more than the christian living on the Isle of Anglesey can claim to know and experience and talk about a different salvation from that of the Orthodox peasant on the Russian steppes.

It would seem then that for the Roman Catholic, the object of faith is indeed God himself as He has revealed himself to man in Christ. But since, as we have said, some form of proposition is the inevitable corollary to the human apprehension of divine revelation, such propositions have an intrinsic role in any act of belief. Since too the truth is the same (though its 'clothing' may vary), it is the church's task so to clothe the truth as to express its meaning, though to require of the faithful to perceive and assent to the meaning as the only sure way to the knowledge and enjoyment of God.

## 2. Towards a common understanding of faith

If the above is a correct appreciation of Roman Catholic teaching on faith in its relation to dogma, then some non-Roman Catholic fears may be alleviated by the knowledge that within the Roman Church christians are not subjected to inquisitorial examinations with regard to the exact mode in which they express their faith in God. Criticism is made of those whose teaching appears to contradict or deviate from the meaning of divine truth revealed to the church, not of those who refuse to underwrite certain formularies (e.g. Paul VI encyclical 'Mysterium Fidei' was directed against those who seemed to detract from the meaning of terms such as transubstantiation; presumably an account of the eucharist which did not include the term would be perfectly acceptable if some other means of proclaiming the truth contained in it were arrived at). Nor should it be forgotten that an Anglican appealing to the first four ecumenical councils of the church in defence of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation is doing no less than a Roman Catholic in appealing to a papal ex cathedra statement. Modern christology may not use the terms of Chalcedon; many however would look for the same truth in modern formulations and would seek light from other expressions of this truth from New Testament times onwards.

Second, it will be acknowledged by both Roman Catholics and non-Roman Catholics that faith is a gift of God; the christian that is to say can only make an act of faith in virtue of God's action in him. That faith should be regarded as a virtue, that it should involve the exercise of the will is only because like all virtues it is formed in man by God who himself 'worketh in us to will and to do his good pleasure'. In this we are concerned not this time with 'fides quae creditur' (as we were in the first section), but with 'fides qua creditur'; and catholics and non-catholics are not so likely to be at odds over the notion that faith is a human response to God's revelation, a childlike trust in Him, (fides fiducialis, fides formata caritate) a movement of the whole person towards Him whom he perceives to be the Truth.

There is third however the question that faith involves the believer in certainties and not in hypotheses. Faith is neither blind hope, nor is it speculation. Austin Farrer (in Reflective Faith) describes it as a mode of apprehension

in which we come closest to the divine way of knowing, totally without the support of our servant, reason, yet looking back we find that reason is indeed our servant though not the central structure of our faith. 'Faith' writes Farrer, 'apprehends him (God) revealing aspects of himself not implicit in the mere existence of our connatural objects' (as opposed to the natural mind which apprehends God only insofar as he is revealed as a factor in the existence of those objects which are 'connatural' with us). And again: 'Revelation is apprehended by a bare acceptance of those things which God chooses to show concerning himself through certain events, signs and words of his own selection'. Yet this mode of apprehension of God's revelation bears within itself a certainty which transcends the approach of either the realist or the idealist. It concerns 'that which we have seen from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have look upon and touched with our hands' (I John 1.1); it means 'being certain of the things we cannot see'. (Heb.11.1).

If this indeed is the nature of faith, then it is not surprising that the community of faith (sc. the church) will propose some model to convey this sense of certainty, this reality of the 'givenness' of revelation, the essential difference between that which is apprehended through faith and that which is arrived at through the natural mind alone. The doctrine of the infallibility of the church may perhaps be one such model, in fact is such a model if the term proves acceptable. So too the Anglican appeal to Scripture, to councils and to creeds is another such model. Since God has revealed himself, since the church through faith has apprehended that which has been revealed (or rather Him who has been revealed) then it is to the church in the whole variety of her expressions of revealed truth that we must look not for an opinion, nor for a temporary interpretation to be improved upon, but for certain guidance towards the knowledge of certain truth. May we not regard the papacy as one servant in this respect of the whole church.

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