

SUB-COMMISSION ON THE CHURCH AND AUTHORITY

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A Note on Medieval Papalism

by

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The distinctive feature of Roman Catholic theology is the way in which its focal point tends to be the papacy and the Petrine succession. Of course Roman Catholic theologians are much occupied with the same questions as their colleagues in other confessions: of course non-Roman theologians take what some popes did or said seriously -- not even the Revd. Ian Paisley disapproved of Gregory the Great one imagines, but there is an important difference. In the first and the last resort the Roman theologian has to reckon with a view of the Church in which, first, Peter had an authority superior to the other apostles and disciples, including Paul, secondly that this authority has been handed down through each generation to the pope of his own day. I repeat the pope and the papacy need not always or even often be in the theologian's thoughts qua theologian. In many fields such as eucharistic theology or Christology there is comparatively little call to make much study of papal opinions and decrees. But the theologian as he is a Roman Christian is a thinker in communion with the pope of the day and a man whose touchstone of inclusion or exclusion within the visible Church is in like situation. This in these ecumenical days presents him problems. He cannot but see that on many fundamental matters he is much more in accord with a Calvinist colleague on the eucharist than a fellow-papist and so on. I do not pretend that this puzzlement is easy to resolve, as it seemed it was in the days when almost everybody agreed that either the Romans gave up the papal claims, or the non-Romans adopted them, but an approach to the answer may perhaps be found by looking again at the papalism of the high middle ages. It is after all this that the Reformers rejected; it is this that was in part revised and in part reformulated at the council of Trent and above all it is this that somehow came to pieces in our hands at the two Vatican councils. The first by its enigmatic definition of papal infallibility. (I may be forgiven for referring to my essay in Papacy and Hierarchy, R. A. Markus and E. John, for an extended treatment of the problems of the meaning of ex cathedra.) the second for its questioning of the depressed status of bishops and the division of the Church into two castes, clerical and lay, the one ruling the other supporting. It is furthermore

becoming clear that about the time of the eastern schism there were fundamental changes in the theology of the papacy, and they came at a time when neither historical nor theological scholarship were in a position to act as checks to the more extreme developments. The world in which universities and real theological schools arose was a world in which the papalism of the Gregorian reform movement and the scholastic method that seemed natural to its progenitors was given in such a sense that no other seemed probable.

It seems to me that the reforming theologian of the tenth and eleventh centuries, whose theology infinitely more refined became the data of the more famous canonists and schoolmen of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, made a fundamental shift from an eschatological ecclesiology to a 'here and now' one. It had been natural for Gregory the Great, a pope very conscious of his authority as successor of Peter, to rebuke the bishop of Constantinople for calling himself universal bishop, not because that title was a papal prerogative but because it was hideous arrogance for one bishop, whosoever he might be to claim superiority of status over other bishops. What Gregory meant was, I think, that in the context of the Church which had many of its faithful, including bishops of Constantinople and Rome as well as elsewhere, safely at rest in the Civitas Dei, it was monstrous arrogance to claim precedence. Here and now Gregory had no doubt he had a primary authority but what mattered was an eternal perspective in which he was only one of a number of bishops, even in the succession of his own see, whose authority was of no moment except here and now.

The reformers had by Gregory VII's day developed a different view of the Church. They were much concerned with the here and now and the removal of real abuses: they developed a new kind of distinction, new at least in its prevalence and the weight put on it, of Christianitas, or Christendom. Their ecclesiology was almost exclusively directed to the control and purification of here and now; the most famous and succinct product of this view is Gregory VII's famous Dicatus Papae. DP 2 shows the change: 'Only the Roman bishop (the word is pontifex not papa) is rightly called universal.' His legates take precedence over local bishops, so that it is perfectly right for a bishop like Anselm of Lucca to sit in judgement, as legate, on his metropolitan, Milan. He may depose or reconcile bishops at will without reference to any synod or council. He is intellectually inerrent, DP.22, and morally preserved from error, DP 23, because in the exercise of his office, by the merits

of blessed Peter, he is sanctus. It is this position the later canonists worked out. DP22 they curiously handled very gingerly, perhaps because it hardly seemed necessary when they developed DP 23 into a thesis that the pope could commit fornication as a man and forgive himself as deus: the sanctus was promoted to deus in the course of time. The title deeds for this were the famous Petrine texts placed in context with Mt.18, 18 - it was an elder contemporary of Gregory the ineffable Cardinal Humbert who first placed the two texts in tandem.

So deeply has the collocation of these texts gone in Roman theology that one often finds it difficult to persuade people that there is nothing in the text about binding and loosing to suggest that Jesus was referring to Peter specially and that it is only Humbert's say-so that authorises this interpretation not any Apostle or Father.

What has happened is that the very curious and ambiguous picture of Peter's authority presented in the New Testament has been given a thousand years later, a very specific interpretation. This interpretation cannot be final or definitive, if only because it puts such enormous weight on the here and now view of the Church. The circumstances of the development of this theology were very special and their intellectual component, the canonist's deductive method, meant that it was assumed that development could only proceed within an authoritarian, hierarchical conception of the Church, by which popes, sometimes simply mouthpieces for their favoured lawyers, pronounced canon-law and that was law, silly or not (Kissing is mortal sin - Alexander VII; and so on) and as the case may be. The result is that canon-law only retains what credibility it does retain because of the very large amount of it that is forgotten over the ages.

My main point is that Roman Catholics are not committed to the medieval canonists' model of papal authority. If the Church managed with something much less worked out and much less centralised for a thousand years so could we. The credibility of the medieval model of papal authority depends on an inadequate model of the Church lacking the dimension of eternity. What we need are, I believe, theologians with the attitude of the medieval masons who carved some of their best work in inaccessible places visible only to God. We shall need I think a theology of the world that puts it in its place and a real feeling that institutions are are only patterns of behaviour not solid fabric like a medieval

cathedral. If we do this, and the only picture of the Church that is at all like this is to be found in the New Testament, especially in the account of Paul's relations with Peter in 2 Galatians, some of the problems will be solved. It seems to me that it is not unreasonable that theologians of several confessions might co-operate in this work, only those quite satisfied that their model of authority says it all, gets it right, could not, and even they would exclude themselves.

So far as Papists are concerned, it might be well pointed out in conclusion that except when they are writing books and arguing about theology, in their ordinary religious lives they think of the papacy rather seldom and this is as it should be. Life is about birth, copulation, and death and the questions of papal authority are only marginal to these. In a Church visibly one, holy, and catholic, I suspect that even if, as I believe, it will still have a pope, we shall hear very little of him in normal times.