

SUB-COMMISSION ON THE CHURCH AND AUTHORITY

PAPER VIII

III c Problems concerning the non-infallible exercise of authority, doctrinal and disciplinary

by

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1. Introductory: A note on three treatments of authority which have been found useful.

(i) Problems of Authority, An Anglo-French Symposium, Ed. John M. Todd (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962), particularly

Paper 4 The Authority of the Councils (Peter Franson, S.J.)

Paper 5 The Authority of the Indwelling Word (Dom Paul Grammont, O.S.B. and Dom Philibert Zobel, O.S.B.),

Paper 7 The Historical Development of Authority in the Church. Points for Reflection (Yves Congar, O.P.)

(ii) Gradations of Authority (article in Theology, Sept. 1957, pp. 359-365) T.R. Milford

(iii) Religion and the National Church (Essay in "Soundings" C.U.P. 1962) A.R. Vidler

From "Problems of Authority" (pp. 149/150, Y. Congar):

"At the present time we live in a period of re-discovery in breadth and depth of our own heritage. And this is due above all to the active investigation of the permanent sources: Scripture, Tradition, the Fathers, the Liturgy. This return to the sources has already begun to emphasise the necessity of a certain rediscovery of the two religious realities by reference to which authority must find out the truth about itself. They are the living God active among us through his grace, and the holy community and brotherhood of the faithful. It is by seeing authority in an authentic relationship with these two Christian realities that we shall be able to go back beyond legalism which consists in seeing the formal validity of phenomena without penetrating to their meaning. The movement back to the sources must go forward until it restores a completely evangelical concept of authority, a concept that will be both fully supernatural and fully communal."

Compare: T.R. Milford (op. cit. p.364): "When the Church continues humble and human, and acknowledges that even its most sacred and authoritarian formulas are under the judgment of God, then it authenticates itself to the affectionate and believing soul as being possessed by, through never controlling, the power and presence of God. Precisely in not claiming infallibility or divinity or finality for itself, it witnesses to the continuing activity in and around it of the Holy Spirit, who 'in the end' will lead us into all truth."

and: Problems of Authority p.22 (Mgr. A. Pailier, "Authority is the Servant of Charity"): "The dominant value towards which the authority of the Church leads God's children is Charity. Her teaching authority gives birth to Faith which is at the service of Love which must be known if it is to be actively accepted."

and: A.R. Vidler (op. cit. p.254): "All traditional doctrines and institutions must be subject to this test (i.e. Gal. 5.22f., the fruit of the Spirit), and there is no obligation on Christians to promote or preserve what does not survive it."

2. These examples from recent Roman Catholic and Anglican writing illustrate the contemporary thrust towards the concept Authority as a Ministry of Reconciliation.

Some questions:

(i) The pastoral episcopate ("The power of jurisdiction itself is defined as that pastoral guidance which creates and maintains unity in love" - P. of A. p.22). The bishop absorbed by administrative and financial worries. ("Accipe calamum administrativum ut possis scribere, scribere, scribere usque in sempiternum et ultra", Fr. Combalot, mid. 19C.). The size of the diocese. The distancing of the bishop from his clergy and people. The current ("man come of age") suspicion of "paternalism": its truth or falsity, its effect.

(ii) Relations between the permanent administrators in the Churches and the pastorate. The necessary movement towards centralisation of financial accounts and statistical information, and the "authority" of the bodies controlling them. Does the rationale of the "take-over bid" in business intrude itself (inevitably?) into the Church's administration? ("One question therefore before us is how the Church as an embodiment of Christian community can be kept free from the domination of organisers and legalisers" - Vidler p.252. The fear of impersonal control.)

(iii) The parish. A shortage of ordinands, and its implications for the parishes? A reluctant acceptance by the Church of congregational initiatives, or an encouragement that Christians be "altogether less docile to what is laid down or traditionally prescribed, discovering for themselves what really does hold good and make sense in this age of the world" (Vidler p. 260-1). The line between this and a "congregationalism."

3. The Synodal Principle

Questions

(i) "A diocese must be of such a size as to have a representative synod, whose members can really know each other as well as represent their parishes" (Bishop of Willesden, in "Growing into Union" (S.P.C.K. 1970) p.79). (note: pages 78-9 are a statement of a bishop's restlessness with the present conditions of the exercise of episcopal authority.)

Shall we succeed in securing the representative laymen for synodical engagements?

If (a major question) we see the laity as having a voice in decision-making at synodal level (a rediscovery here? "The Church's complicated organisation was built up largely on the assumption, current at the time, that the only educated people were ecclesiastics. There was an exclusion of the laity from many levels of the Church's life simply for this reason" -

P. of A. p.223), do we take care (and how?) that the laity who articulate the *sensus fidelium* are not confined to a class defined by particular opportunities of formal education and by the freedom to order their own time so as to attend?

(ii) A question posed by A.R. Vidler for the Church of England in England, with wider ramifications? "If the Church of England were simply disestablished we might find that we had jettisoned the framework and ethos of a national church and were landed with an episcopalian sect the effect of turning the church in upon itself" (p.261). The Church's concern, at synodal level, with issues of society: the implications of such a report as "Putting Asunder: a Divorce Law for Contemporary Society (1966)" i.e. the Archbishop's Group concerned with the secular law of marriage in a plural society in which only a minority accepted the traditional Christian view of marriage.

4. The Authority of charisms (the prophetic element) and of sound learning.

The latitude given to the man or group looking forward and seeking to interpret formularies and adapt customs, as they have sought to come to terms with new knowledge, new ways of thinking and new social habits.

Do we recognise a charisma of the disciplined and informed sociological thinker? (Compare the field of work of the Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England and its highly specialised reports).

A charisma of the revolutionary? See D.M. MacKinnon's observations on the Church's attitude towards, in "The Stripping of the Altars".