

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

Before turning to the specifically R.C. view of the location and quality of authority in the Church, it may be well to try to clarify our ideas of authority and especially of authority in the church.

I find helpful Mackenzie's distinction between authority and power. Power, as between human beings, exerts itself by limiting the freedom of action of those subject to it. The Trojans, according to one theory, took advantage of their position on the straits between the Black Sea and the Aegean to extort customs dues from Greek ships trading between the two seas. This was an exercise of power; the Greek traders were limited in their own freedom by it. (Note: power of convention and psychological pressure).

Authority, on the other hand, when it is pure, exerts no power and in no way limits the freedom of its subjects. What it does is to appeal to their responsibility, leaving them free to answer the appeal positively or negatively. Power says: You must; authority says: You OUGHT. But no-one can behave as he ought and because he ought except with full freedom of choice and decision. If I am right, the opposition often alleged between authority and freedom is non-existent. There is an opposition between power and freedom, but a relation of mutual implication between authority and responsibility.

One further point. I assume that authority, in the ultimate analysis, belongs to persons or groups of persons. It is true that we normally speak of the authority of the Bible, but I would

suggest that we mean, in the end, the authority of God expressed in the Bible.

It should further be noted that authority often is not "pure". It is often allied with power, and this alliance is sometimes legitimate.

Authority is recognized in the expert, the charismatic, and the official. We listen with respect to a distinguished physicist talking about physics; we acknowledge him as an authority in his own field (while sometimes regretting that he does not restrict himself to it: ne sutor supra crepidem). Note that we accord him authority not inasmuch as we have checked his results and found them accurate - if we have done that, we are no longer bowing to his authority but emulating him precisely as an expert. This reminds us that authority has something to do with belief, as distinct from knowledge. It is because we respect the authority of the expert that we turn to theologians for their help instead of doing all the theology ourselves; and so too we respect that expert biblical scholar. In our world today, the scientist is a type of expert who wields great authority.

Then there is the authority of the charismatic. By the charismatic I mean not precisely the expert, but the man who commends himself to us by qualities either of outstanding personality or of quasi-inspirational type. In my sense, Wesley was a charismatic. So was John XXIII, and so is Helder Camara. Such men, like the Cure d'Ars, inspire confidence and sometimes evoke awe. Like the expert, they have an important social function. None of us can encompass by personal knowledge all that is required

for the co-existence of men in society. In acknowledging the expert and the charismatic we find ourselves linked together in common convictions and common enterprises.

But the occurrence of expertise and of charisma is irregular and spasmodic, insufficient for the permanent coherence of a stable society. There is therefore a third kind of authority, the official. The polis, according to Aristotle, is the product of economic need; but its ends are more than merely economic; they are what he calls "the good life"; they are what we might call, in the broad sense, moral. And because we are by nature both moral and social, society puts us under a moral obligation. Of society thus conceived, the expert and the charismatic are both in their way an expression, and they carry an authority which derives from their social *Sitz im Leben*. But the official is an institutional representative of society and its claims upon us. His authority is neither that of his acquired knowledge nor of his personal qualities or inspiration, but precisely of his representational function. In extreme cases, he may be personally ill-equipped to claim authority. In ancient Athens the archons were chosen by lot from among all the citizens, as though to express the fact that their authority was merely official. In a hereditary monarchy, the deciding factor is not the suitability of the person for supreme office, but the legitimacy of his descent; and the paradox of officialdom is expressed in our British dictum that "the king can do no wrong".

Here it may be pointed out that official authority is often associated with power. Ideally, a human society will live by the

responsibly free response of the citizens to authority as such; and in our own troubled times, it is well to remember how true this is even today. It is just the emergence of violent protest, passionate non-conformity, anarchism and nihilism that reminds us to what a large extent society still depends on the free consent of the citizens. But though this can be relied on ut in pluribus, it is statistically to be expected, and is verified in fact, that not all the citizens exercise their freedom with full responsibility. In order therefore to secure the cohesion of society, official authority is endowed with legal power of enforcement; it arms itself with a police force; it builds prisons and, in the last resort, forcibly deprives dissentients of their social rights. Something of the same sort can be true also in the Church. Traditional canon law has its chapter de poenis, and though the sanctions are nowadays mainly spiritual, they are none the less real. It is doubtful whether the Church could ultimately live its life without the reserved power of excommunication.

It is hardly necessary to observe that, in fact, two or three types of authority may often coincide in one person. Athanasius was both the official head of the second See of Christendom and a theological expert. John XXIII was a charismatic and an official at the same time. Some would see in the late Archbishop Temple a combination of prophecy, theology, and official authority at the same time.

No-one, presumably, would wish to dispute the existence, under the gospel dispensation, of the authority of experts and of charismatics. Whether official authority also has a place will

depend on whether it is conceded that the Church is, in some regards and under a certain aspect, a visible fellowship of human beings, a congregatio or collaboration of believers. This I take to be an agreed truth among us here, and the question arises of the location of official authority in the Church, its field of exercise and its extent; and finally of its origin.

I want to begin with the field of exercise of authority. In modern civil society, authority of an official kind is simply practical in its scope. The modern state, in the free West, does not claim to propound or propagate an ideology or a faith of any kind. It is essentially neutral. Its scope is primarily public order, and in a vaguer sense the common temporal good. It is obvious that at least the common good can only be assessed by reference to some theory of the good; but the secular state listens to the voice of public opinion as to what that good is, and pretends to do no more than, in a very fallible and indeed tentative way, to reflect public opinion in its enactments.

The Church also has a practical aim in the exercise of authority; the preservation of unity and harmony in herself, corresponding to the aim of public order; but also, and more importantly, the promotion of that supernatural and eternal good which is the salvation of mankind in Christ. The former aim is covered largely by Canon Law, which should be seen as a structure for the harmonisation of personal rights with the common life. The way of salvation is of course the real subject matter of moral theology. But in the R.C. Church official authority takes care of this also, though largely under a different heading.

For Church authority has a more than merely practical task. It is a teaching authority as well as a governing one. The Church, unlike the civil state, exists to proclaim a gospel and to give a teaching (kerygma and didaché). Neither of these is merely individualistic. The faith is a common good of believers, even though their ACT and HABIT of faith are most inwardly personal. The faith lives in "the mind of the Church" or the sensus fidelium, but this mind needs some way of articulating its findings and of expressing them. In our view, this task falls to official authority, and we would appeal to NT passages in support of this position. To sum the position up, we say that the Church - and her officials - have authority in "teaching of faith and morals". Hence Councils of Popes not only define for us the person of Christ as existing in two natures, but also teach us about the applications of moral law in fields such as that of marriage. It is indeed laid down that, when this teaching authority is exercised at its highest and extreme level - of which more in a moment - it is limited by the contents and implications of divine revelation itself (concluded within the apostolic age), and by the extent of those unrevealed truths which are necessary for the proclamation and maintenance of gospel truth. At a lower level, there is so far as I am aware no such limitation, or at least it has never been clearly laid down.

What do I mean about the higher and lower levels of teaching? It is obvious that bishops and Popes spend their lives in teaching. And in order to teach one has, at times at least, to make statements in propositional form. No-one should suppose that all these

statements have, each of them singly, any definitive sanction or guarantee. There have been heretical bishops and probably may be again. There are more solemn occasions, on which regional councils - or today conferences - and even ecumenical councils, make more carefully considered statements, just as from time to time a modern Pope will issue a doctrinal Encyclical. Such teaching has greater authority than the obiter dicta of an individual bishop. But we believe that there are occasions when an ecumenical council or a Pope can formulate some aspect of Christian truth in a way which will never have to be discarded as simply false. In other words, there is a charism of infallibility which is exercised by such councils or by Popes under certain fairly stringent conditions. I am not here concerned to defend this belief. I will just refer to the first time when an ecumenical council made a definition which we should take as fulfilling the conditions for irreformability: the first Council of Nicaea. What, I suggest, was at stake at that Council was: how to justify the cultus of Christ which was traditional in the Church with the monotheism which we inherit from Judaism. It was found that no scriptural text or catena of such texts would serve the purpose, since Arius claimed that his own christology was in harmony with the scriptures. Recourse was therefore had to the non-scriptural word "consubstantial", which has survived in the universal Christian Creed known as that of Nicaea. We should claim that not only is this definition true, but that it satisfies the conditions for an infallible definition, and that it therefore comes to the conscience of the individual Christian not simply on the recommendation of its intrinsic truth

but on the authority of the teaching Church - in this case that authority exercised under conditions of infallibility.

It may be well to point out that, in those days, there was no preformed theology of ecumenical councils or infallibility, and that therefore the truth of the definition may seem to us as historians to emerge with certainty only as a result of its subsequent acceptance by the Church - though we should note that it was imposed under the sanction of an anathema. We, however, do not hold that the infallibility of a definition is derived from its subsequent acceptance by the Church; we say that it inheres in the definition - provided of course that the definition satisfies the conditions laid down.

(I wonder from time to time whether this distinction between the source of the infallibility of a definition - or, if you dislike the word "infallibility", let us say its definitive truth - and the recognition that a particular definition has this quality of infallible truth, might not help towards the reconciliation of the R.C. view that a definition, if infallible, is infallible non ex consensu of the Church, and the view of some Orthodox theologians that an infallible definition is one which has secured the assent or consent of the universal Church. It may be added that, on the R.C. view, an infallible definition, though infallible non ex consensu, is still the articulation of the mind of the Church as a whole; for it is a definition of the contents or necessary presuppositions and implications of revelation, and revelation is transmitted, I should hold, by the Church as a whole and not just by the so-called magisterium. The function of the

magisterium is not to TRANSMIT the tradition (= divine revelation as inherited in the Church), but to safeguard and EXPRESS it; without the magisterium the Church is INARTICULATE).

I have already said that magisterial teaching at the lower level is not infallible (though note the "infallibility of the ordinary magisterium", a concept not perhaps yet worked out very clearly). But it calls, in our view, for a responsible reaction from the faithful - what Vatican II calls religiosum obsequium. There is a "presumption" that official teaching will be true teaching, and this presumption constitutes a summons to our conscience. A Catholic will be inclined (a) not rashly to contradict such teaching, (b) to seek to find ways in which it can be seen to be true.

A word should be added about moral teaching. It seems to me to be clear that the Church's magisterium is only infallible in its moral definitions when these relate to "revealed morality" and its necessary penumbra. It may well be that revealed morality is not so much code-morality as: morality seen from the higher viewpoint of our supernatural vocation; and that therefore the Church's moral teaching is rather about virtues than about the morality of specific acts. But much thought is still needed in this field. Note further that moral TEACHING appeals to our intellect, not directly to our will; inasmuch as it is teaching, it invites docility rather than obedience.

But of course officialdom has also legislative authority, taking shape e.g. in Canon Law. A real historical community cannot get on without such legislative (and preceptive) guidance; and the Church must be able, in extreme cases, to excommunicate.

I have been considering, on the whole, PURE authority. It will be acknowledged that this is not enough, since the Church is not only composed of mature and responsible persons. It includes the young, and those who though not young in years have "never grown up". And these have to be incorporated in the whole Church. Church authority has therefore power as well as authority. It has especially the power that is exercised almost unconsciously by the force of convention. I think C.S. Lewis and, more recently, Cardinal Daniélou (in reaction against ideas of the Diaspora Church) lay much stress on this force of convention. It will always be important. But it is dangerous to substitute it for pure authority where the latter will work. It would appear, for instance, that convention largely plays the part of authority in the Church in Ireland; and when the Irish emigrate to this non-Catholic country, they lack the inner resources of responsible freedom and, unsupported by convention, easily fall away.