

CARDINAL RATZINGER AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF UNITY

A brief comment

Edward Yarnold, S.J.

I am grateful for the Editor's invitation to write a short reflection on Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's article 'Anglican-Catholic Dialogue: Its Problems and Hopes'. I read it with admiration and pleasure: I admired the Cardinal's breadth of ecumenical vision and the boldness of his thought; I was pleased that his responsibility as Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (SCDF) was not preventing him from writing creatively as a private theologian.

I wish to concentrate my attention on what the Cardinal calls 'the hermeneutics of unity'. He implies that the two processes involved in the understanding of scripture, exegesis and hermeneutics, apply also to the Church's dogmatic definitions. Exegesis ^{will} ~~must~~ ^{these} ~~included~~ the attempt to understand the meaning of the pope or bishops who formulated the definition; it requires the study of the meaning of the terms used and the purpose which the authors had in mind, as far as this can be discovered by historical research. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, involves the attempt to distinguish the essential truth of a doctrine from the historically-conditioned form in which that truth is defined; it involves also the attempt to restate this essential truth in the terms of other ages and cultural situations. Unlike exegesis, which is the work of the historian, hermeneutics, involving the discernment of the truth ~~of the Gospel~~, ^{only} can be performed within the community of faith.

The application of hermeneutics to dogmatic formulas is not, of course, a new discovery. It is implied, for example, by Newman's theory of the development of doctrine, and of the power living ideas have to assimilate new ideas: 'life is characterized by growth, so that in no respect to grow is to cease to live.'

2

The SCDF itself ten years ago ~~stated~~ expounded a theory of dogmatic definitions which implies the need of hermeneutics in their interpretation. The passage in question, which is ~~taken from~~ contained in a Declaration designed to correct misunderstandings about the nature of the Church and to warn against dogmatic relativism, is so little known that it seems worth quoting it in full.

The transmission of divine Revelation by the Church encounters difficulties of various kinds. These arise from the fact that the hidden mysteries of God "by their nature so far transcend the human intellect that even if they are revealed to us and accepted by faith, they remain concealed by the veil of faith itself and are as it were wrapped in darkness." Difficulties arise also from the historical condition that affects the expression of Revelation.

With regard to this historical condition, it must first be observed that the meaning of the pronouncements of faith depend partly upon the expressive power of the language used at a certain point in time and in particular circumstances. Moreover, it sometimes happens that some dogmatic truth is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered in a broader context of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression. In addition, when the Church makes new pronouncements she intends to confirm or clarify what is in some way contained in sacred Scripture or in previous expressions of Tradition; but at the same time she usually has the intention of solving certain questions or removing certain errors. All these things have to be taken into account in order that these pronouncements may be properly interpreted. Finally, even though the truths which the Church intends to teach through her dogmatic formulas are distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given epoch and can be expressed without them, nevertheless it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the sacred Magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions.

In view of the above, it must be stated that the dogmatic formulas of the Church's Magisterium were from the very beginning suitable for communicating revealed truth, and that as they are they remain for ever suitable for communicating this truth to those who interpret them correctly. It does not however follow that every one of these formulas has always been or will always

be so to the same extent. For this reason theologians seek to define exactly the intention of teaching proper to the various formulas, and in carrying out this work they are of considerable assistance to the living Magisterium of the Church, to which they remain subordinated. For this reason also it often happens that ancient dogmatic formulas and others closely connected with them remain living and fruitful in the habitual usage of the Church, but with suitable expository and explanatory additions that maintain and clarify their original meaning. In addition, it has sometimes happened that in this habitual usage of the Church certain of these formulas gave way to new expressions which, proposed and approved by the sacred Magisterium, presented more clearly or completely the same meaning.

Similarly the present Pope and Pope Paul VI on several occasions ^{have} spoken of pluriformity ⁱⁿ doctrinal expressions as something to be not merely tolerated but positively desired. Thus Pope Paul VI, preaching in the Lateran Basilica in the presence of a delegation from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople on 24 January 1972 spoke of St Cyprian's concept of the Church as

a composite and articulated body, in which parts and groups can be modelled in particular typical forms, and functions can be distinct, though fraternal and converging. Here, in the heart of unity and the centre of catholicity, we dream of the living beauty of the Bride of Christ, the Church, 'wrapped in her many-coloured garment' (Ps 45.15), clothed, we mean in a legitimate pluralism of traditional expressions.³

The term 'traditional expressions', it is true, has a wider reference than formulations of doctrines, but can hardly fail to include them. In speaking of 'typical forms', Pope Paul lent his authority to Cardinal Willebrand's vision of 'a plurality of typoi within the communion of the one and only Church of Christ'. The Cardinal, who is President of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, had expounded this view in a sermon he preached in Cambridge in January 1970. He explained that a typos is 'a harmonious and organic whole of complementary elements', which include liturgy, spirituality and canon law. First on the Cardinal's list of these elements was 'a characteristic theological method and approach'.⁴ He did not expressly conclude that ^{such} a variety of theological methods and approaches necessarily results in a plurality of doctrinal formulation, but the conclusion seems inescapable.

The present Pope has spoken in the same vein. For example,

addressing a delegation from the Coptic Church on the subject of dialogue, he affirmed that

"fundamental to this dialogue is the recognition that the richness of this unity in faith and spiritual life has to be expressed in diversity of forms. Unity - whether on the universal level or the local level - does not mean uniformity or the absorption of one group by another. It is rather at the service of all groups to help each live better the proper gifts it has received from God's Spirit.⁵

On a less formal occasion, at the end of 1980, Pope John Paul II expounded a theory of dogmatic hermeneutics, though without employing the term. 'The sense of the relative', he said, which has nothing to do with scepticism, teaches us to discern what is essential. A certain number of difficulties in faith ... are due to relativising the absolute and absolutising the relative.⁶

Acceptance of dogmatic pluriformity implies acceptance of dogmatic hermeneutics, for the pluriformity arises from the restatement of doctrines in different terms. What seems original in Cardinal Ratzinger's theory is the ~~understanding~~ ^{explicit recognition} that this hermeneutic process needs to be conducted with reference to the statements of belief of other Churches. 'Unity', he writes, is a fundamental, hermeneutic principle of all theology, and we must learn to read the documents which have been handed down to us, according to the hermeneutics of unity, which show up much that is new and open doors where only bolts were visible before. Such hermeneutics of unity will entail reading the statements of both parties in the context of the whole tradition and with a deeper understanding of Scripture. This will include investigating how

Insert on p. 4

The application of these principles enabled both popes on several occasions to affirm that Catholics and 'Monophysites' (Copts, Syrian Orthodox, Armenians and Ethiopians) shared the same faith concerning the full humanity and divinity of Jesus, even though the 'Monophysites' reject the Council of Chalcedon's definition which attributed to Christ the two natures of God and man. For example in May 1980, Pope John Paul II, addressing the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, referred to a common declaration ~~that~~ which the Patriarch had made nine years earlier with Pope Paul VI, in which the two leaders recognised that,

even if over the centuries difficulties have arisen because of the different theological expressions which have been used to express our faith in the word of God made flesh and become really man, the faith we intend to proclaim is the same. ^{6A}

The startling ecumenical implications of such language has not been generally grasped. The two popes, by applying the hermeneutics of unity, have been able to conclude that Catholics are one in faith with other Christians who ~~are~~ are unable to recognise a council which Catholics regard as binding. The application of this principle to relations between Catholics and Anglicans has still to be explored.

decisions since the separation have been stamped with a certain particularisation both as to language and thought - something that might well be transcended without doing violence to the content of the statements. For hermeneutics are not a skilful device for escaping from burdensome authorities by a change of verbal function (though this abuse has often occurred), but rather apprehending the word with an understanding which at the same time covers in it new possibilities.⁷

~~What seems original in Cardinal Ratzinger's exposition is the explicit recognition that this hermeneutic process needs to be~~

~~That~~ The Cardinal's point can perhaps be put in this way. Since the definitions which have been made since the division of Christendom will be in danger of suffering from a one-sidedness, a limitation of vision, or a lack of balance, in discerning ~~it~~ of one Church, what is the essential truth of a doctrine/hermeneutics will have to take into account the statements of faith of the other Churches. For example, the Tridentine definition ~~is~~ ^{concerning} the conversion of the substance of bread into the substance of the body of Christ, ~~while~~ ^{while} the appearances remain unchanged, suffers from ~~the absence~~ ^{a lack of} of the sacramental dimension, which was preserved in the Anglican tradition, which in its turn was lacking in emphasis on the reality of Christ's presence. Neither Church needs to renounce its tradition; ~~both~~ ^{each} needs to share the insights of the other.

emphasis

There is, however, one sentence in Cardinal Ratzinger's article which is written in a different spirit from the rest. I refer to the passage in which he seems to be adding his personal approval to the SCDF's criticism of ARCIC. He/writes of the particular areas in which full agreement has not yet been reached, and which were noted in the communication from the Congregation ~~of~~ for the Faith: Eucharist

with emphasis on sacrifice, transubstantiation and, according to circumstances, adoration of the consecrated species; sacramental nature and content of the priesthood ...; theological substantiation and concrete ecclesiastical content of the Petrine office.⁸

The Commission did not, indeed, speak of 'full' agreement. But the members believed that they had reached 'substantial' agreement, or agreement over essentials, concerning all these points of doctrine except papal infallibility (though claiming even here that substantial agreement was possible).⁹ This agreement was reached precisely by practising a form of the hermeneutics of unity, by 'seeking to pursue together that restatement of doctrine which new times and conditions are, as we both recognize, regularly calling for'.¹⁰ The SCDF, on the other hand, does not seem to have grasped this hermeneutics of unity, and seems in danger of falling into the danger which Pope John Paul pointed out, that of 'absolutising the relative'. One example of their method must suffice.

have been
 It would be helpful, in order to permit Catholics to see *their faith fully expressed in this point, to make clear* that this real presence of the sacrifice of Christ, accomplished by the sacramental words, that is to say by the ministry of the priest saying 'in persona Christi' the words of the Lord, includes a participation of the Church, the Body of Christ, in the sacrificial act of her Lord, so that she offers sacramentally in him and with him his sacrifice. Moreover, the propitiatory value that Catholic dogma attributes to the Eucharist, which is not mentioned by ARCIC, is precisely that of sacramental offering.¹¹

∧ In other words, it would have been helpful to Catholics if the agreement had been made explicitly in Catholic terms. Where are the hermeneutics of unity?

In his address to the members of the Commission in 1980,

Pope John Paul accurately defined ARCIC's method:

Your method has been to go behind the habit of thought and expression born and nourished in enmity and controversy, to scrutinise together the great common treasure, to clothe it ~~in~~ a language at once traditional and expressive of the insights of an age which no longer glories in strife but seeks to come together in listening to the quiet voice of the Spirit.¹²

These words obviously do not constitute an approval of all the Commission's results. But they do imply ~~the~~ approval of its method, the method of Cardinal Ratzinger's ~~h~~ermeneutic of unity, which the SCDF ~~so signally~~ ^{apparently} failed to understand.

It is to be hoped that Catholics throughout the world, in assessing the ARCIC agreement, will be guided not only by the Observations of Cardinal ~~R~~atzinger's Sacred Congregation, but also his own hermeneutics of unity.

1. Essay on the D. of St. Basil, Penguin
ed., 1974, p. 116.

2 (24 June '73) AAS 65 (73) 396-
408, esp. pp. 402-3. Eng. ^{trans}
^{taken from} in The Tablet

AAS 64 (1972) 197-8

4 (TAIE p. 90.)

5 ^{2 June 1970} AAS 71 (79) 1000-1. Re
Eng. in the original text.

6 Address to a youth festival
in Rome given by the Third

6A AAS ^{Comment} 72 (80) 395, TAIE 226.

7 P. 7
7A D Schönwälder 1652
8 P. 8

9 ? FR. p. 5.

10 P. 2.

11 SCDP

12 JP 2

write a short
the 'Anglican-
I read it with
all's breadth of
ht; I was
he Sacred
(P) was not
vate theologian.
he Cardinal calls
the two processes in
is and hermeneutics,
. Exegesis ^{will} ~~must~~
of the pope or
ires the study of
hich the authors
y historical
volves the
doctrine from
truth is defined;
sential truth in
. Unlike exeg-
neutics, involving
nly
be performed

within the community of faith.

The application of hermeneutics to dogmatic formulas is not, of course, a new discovery. It is implied, for example, by Newman's theory of the development of doctrine, and of the power living ideas have to assimilate new ideas: 'life is characterized by growth, so that in no respect to grow is to cease to live.'