

Authority and Obedience in the Church Today—I

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It is a truism—and one repeated so often that it is starting to become tedious—that the issue of *Humanae Vitae* has precipitated a crisis of authority and obedience in the Church. Indeed the Roman authorities have been talking in these terms for several years now.

What, of course, is tedious about the phrase is the indiscriminate way in which it is employed. It may be helpful just to look at what the term 'crisis' basically means. It means, of course, simply 'judgment', 'testing', 'questioning'. So, if we talk about a crisis of authority and obedience, we mean that authority and obedience are under question. But many jump immediately to the conclusion that this means that an attempt is being made to overthrow all authority and obedience in the Church. This seems to me a peculiarly obtuse misreading of the situation. There is undoubtedly a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction within the Church at the current theory and practice of ecclesiastical authority, but this is something quite different from wishing to throw overboard all authority in the Church, lock, stock and barrel. I do not see why this dissatisfaction in the Church should not be as much a 'sign of the times' for the Church as was the dissatisfaction with, say, the Church's attitude to other Churches, or with the sclerosed ecclesiology that dominated in post-Tridentine times till our own days. These dissatisfactions had a fruitful result: the spirit and theology behind Vatican II. Why should we weep and be fearful regarding the dissatisfaction about authority? Is it not rather a sign that we should look again at authority in the Church? Why should we judge *a priori* that this dissatisfaction, unlike the others we have mentioned, is not also a work of the Holy Spirit seeking to renew the face of the Church?

Where are we to start in this new look at authority in the Church? Assuredly not from any philosophical reflections based on the general practice of authority and obedience among men. As we shall see, Christ specifically warned the Apostles against taking secular authority as a model. Our norm must be revelation and the channels whereby God's Word reaches us and challenges us to the assent of faith. And principally, of course, the more informative channel of Scripture.

In studying Scripture our eyes will be principally on the Apostles, whose position of authority in the Church is undeniable. But here it is important to remember that, as Schelkle says, 'Discipleship is the

start of apostleship and endures as its permanent presupposition'. (*Discipleship and Priesthood*, Sheed & Ward, p. 9.) Cf. Mark 3, 14: 'he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to preach.' 'Being with Christ' meant for contemporary disciples at first 'following' him in his physical company, then, after the Ascension, 'being in Christ' in the Pauline sense—and this of course is what discipleship means for us today.

However, among all his contemporary disciples Jesus *does* select twelve. What for? 'To be sent', i.e. they are going to have a *mission* from Christ (and a charism from the Holy Spirit, cf. John 20, 21-22). A mission to do what? The Markan text just quoted says, 'to preach'—and this is clearly the primary work of Apostles. We have, however, two other texts where this mission is made actual:

- (a) the temporary mission (Matt. 10, 1-11, 1, *et par.*)—to proclaim the kingdom of God and with power over spirits,
- (b) the definitive mission (Matt. 28, 18)—to make disciples (i.e. by proclamation of the Word), to baptize (general power to 'do' things), teaching men to observe all commandments Jesus gave.

These texts, together with Acts 1, 15-26, and with what Paul has to say about his claim to apostleship, reveal to us that an Apostle essentially is one who is a witness to the Resurrection and who has received a special mission from the Risen Jesus in person to preach the gospel and teach and to administer the sacraments.

So far we have not mentioned authority (*exousia*) in connexion with the Apostles. The word is not absent from the texts we have mentioned so far. But it is, perhaps, revealing that every time it is used, it is authority over *spirits*, not over *men*, that is referred to. Authority and power are, of course, implied in the mission of the Apostles, but in the perspective of our texts this authority and power is directed to the liberation of men, by the casting out of unclean spirits, by the preaching of the Word and by administration of the life-giving sacraments. Nothing is said of authority *over men*, nor of what we understand by 'governing' or 'ruling' a community.

There are, however, other texts in the Gospels in which authority in the (?secondary) sense of the Apostles' authority over others in the community is involved. These fall into two groups.

First there are the Petrine texts (Matt. 16, 16; Luke 22, 31; John 21, 15). These texts, by way of summary,¹ contain the notions of *master of the palace* or steward (Matt. 16—keys), *shepherd* (John), *leadership in faith* (Matt. 16—rock, and Luke) and also *power of decision* (Matt.—binding power). This latter is also explicitly given to the Twelve as a group in Matt. 18. In fact we can say that *all* of these belong to all of the Apostles—cf. 1 Corinthians 4, 1, where Paul describes himself as 'servant of Christ and *steward* of God's mysteries'. Again, if lower officers in the Church can be shepherds

¹See *Authority in the Church*, J. Mackenzie, S.J., p. 44; et cf. 'The Primacy of Peter: Theology and Ideology—II', Cornelius Ernst, O.P., *New Blackfriars*, May, 1969.

(Ephes. 4, 11 referring to *episkopoi*; Acts 20, 28 referring to presbyters; 1 Peter 5, 2-5), so *a fortiori* are all the Apostles, and the solemn words of Matt. 28, 28 undoubtedly appoint all the Eleven together as leaders in faith. It is within this context of the college of the Apostles that Peter has his undoubted special place as president and core of the group.

Two of the four characteristics mentioned here clearly connote authority-over-others: power of decision and shepherd (paradoxically, in view of the notion of teaching authority in the Church today and the texts it bases itself on, this is not so immediately clear in the case of leadership in faith . . .). But note, in connexion with shepherd there is already a clue to what will become quite clear when we turn to our second group of texts. Shepherd in New Testament times was an image of potent earthly authority. Jesus had already robbed the image of all that: he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. So too, in John, when Jesus talks of Peter as shepherd, he immediately goes on to talk of Peter's death.

Our second group of texts is most important because in them Jesus makes clear the distinctive and specific quality of authority in the Church. Mark 10, 35-45 (*et par.*) is a key text here. Jesus puts all authority and authority-holders in the Church in their place, their true context—i.e. the context of his own mission, which he sharply distinguishes from secular authority. The keynote is service (*diakonia*). 'The Son of Man himself did not come to be served, but to serve.' So too anyone among Jesus's disciples, who wishes to be 'first' or 'great', must be servant and slave (*diakonos, doulos*), in contrast to earthly authority where those who are first (*archein*) and great, 'lord it' (*katakurierein*) and 'make their authority felt' (*katexousiazein*).

Another text of similar bearing is John 13, 12-16: Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. So, in turn, they are to wash *each other's* feet as slaves to each other. This text does not speak specifically of authority in the Church, and one could (and indeed should) interpret Jesus's injunction as one of mutual service to be practised by all in the community. But the point *then* is that the special function of the Twelve is included within the general ecclesial duty of service.

The synoptic text, on the other hand, deals specifically with authority. It is the Twelve with whom Jesus is dealing (Mark 10, 41), and it is their function in the Church and the authority that goes with it that is being referred to. And all this is included under service.

Summing up what we have seen so far, the Gospels lay more stress on the Apostolic mission (and the authority associated with this) to preach and teach and to administer the sacraments (and so liberate men) than they do on authority over others in the community. And when they do talk of this last, they say it is to be exercised quite differently from secular authority and is to be lowly service.

We must now turn to other New Testament texts to see how in fact the Apostles did exercise their authority over others as service in the Christian community. This will be as decisive and as normative for the theory and practice of authority in the Church today as the dominical sayings we have been studying (and to a careful selection of which exclusive attention has been given in the impoverished ecclesiology of post-Tridentine times).

The first point to be made is that it would seem that the Apostles were so given to their mission of preaching and sacraments, that is, to their primordial task of making men Christians and so liberating them, and of *founding* the Church community, that they did not give much thought to the secondary task of exercising authority over others in the community so founded. There is almost a note of impatience in the account of the appointment of the seven deacons in Acts: 'Our job is prayer [and surely the Apostles meant principally liturgical prayer and their presiding at it] and preaching. Not serving of tables. So let others take that over from us entirely.'

Community life is so complicated! So the Apostles found with the community of the Church. Nice if they could have been concerned with just prayer and preaching, and not have been bothered with also being governing officers. But this too they came to see was part of their task, so they buckled to it.

How did they perform it? By remembering the Lord's insistence on service and the avoidance of the simulacrum of secular authority, and also never losing consciousness that all this came second to their positive task of proclamation and of administering the sacraments.

There is no doubt but that the Apostles made decisions in the early community. Four texts can be mentioned here.

Two are concerned with elections. Here the Apostles display a brisk and almost brusque decisiveness. But it is important to note on what precisely this decisiveness falls. One occasion we have already referred to: the election of the seven deacons. The decisiveness appears in the initiation of the office. The decision as to who should take over the office is left to the whole community. Similarly, and perhaps even more remarkable, in the election to make up the number of the Twelve in Acts 1. The initiative that this should be done comes from the Apostles; the choice of a short list of two is made by the whole community, the final decision being then left, not to the Apostles, but to a casting of lots.

Thirdly there is the Council of Jerusalem, Acts 15. Here it is not a matter of apostolic initiation, but rather of the Apostles being appealed to as the competent final authority to decide a burning and urgent problem in the Church: were gentile converts to conform to the Old Testament Law? They do decide the matter, on the side of freedom, be it noted. But they decide it together with the presbyters of the Church of Jerusalem (these possibly are all the adult

males of the community)—cf. vv. 2, 4, 6, 22, 23 (v. 22 even adds to Apostles and elders, 'with the whole Church').

Our final text is 1 Corinthians 5, 1-5, where Paul exercises judgment on and excommunicates those who are living in publicly scandalous sexual immorality. He does this, however, with marked reluctance (2 Corinthians 2, 1-11), and is quick to say to the community, 'any one whom you forgive, I also forgive'.

Summing up now the whole New Testament picture: Discipleship is the enduring presupposition of apostleship. Within the community of disciples the Apostles were chosen by Jesus and given a special mission as witnesses of the Resurrection whereby they are authorized and empowered by the Risen Lord in person to carry out a two-fold task:

(a) the primary and basic mission to preach, teach and to administer the sacraments—these *founding* the Church community;

(b) the secondary work of exercising authority over others in the community so founded.

All of this is very firmly put by Jesus, and seen by the Apostles, under the rubric of lowly service, and (especially with reference to the secondary task) is to be exercised precisely not on the pattern of secular authority.

In their exercise of authority in community, the Apostles function either as initiators or as final judges of burning problems affecting the whole Church, in both cases being careful to associate others with themselves, consulting widely in the whole community and largely leaving the choice of officers (even an Apostle!) to the community as a whole.

All of this constitutes a norm for the theory and practice of the office of the successors to the Apostles in every age of the Church. This norm functions not only as a moral touchstone for testing the performance of individual office-bearers. It also serves as the criterion of the actual structures of authority holding in any age of the Church.

For it is clear that the structures of authority have changed over the centuries. We are not referring here to the basic structures of episcopacy and papal primacy, but rather to the ideological super-structures erected on this base in differing times—i.e., how Church authorities have seen and practised their office at different periods. *This* has changed. The ideology of episcopal and papal authority is clearly different, say, in the Church of the Fathers before Constantine, in what Newman calls the Benedictine centuries (also, let us remember, centuries of undivided East and West in the Church), in the post-Hildebrandine Middle Ages, and in the post-Reformation period.¹

No doubt this change can partly be understood as authentic

¹Cf. e.g. 'Priesthood and Ministry', Cornelius Ernst, O.P., *New Blackfriars*, December, 1967; 'The Primacy of Peter: Theology and Ideology—I', *ibid.*, April, 1969.

doctrinal development, and I certainly would not wish to deny *a priori* that every period has some contribution to make in this sphere. However, this change is also at least partly due to something else, namely, the changing condition of mankind. The ideology of Church authority in the Benedictine centuries is different from antiquity, simply because people in the Church were now no longer a population dominated by classical culture, but were predominantly barbarians who had to be dealt with, paternalistically, as children.

Now if this is so, and if it is legitimately so (which I would not wish to deny), this is tantamount to saying that the Church ought to change its ideology of authority at epochal stages in the development of mankind, making itself, like St Paul, all things to all men. It would be difficult to deny that we are at such an epochal point now.

Another consideration is important here and is directly relevant to our present-day crisis of authority, and that is the relation of Church authority to secular authority. Can it really be denied that the ideology of authority in the Church has been contaminated with the ideology of secular authority—and this in a very special way since the time of Hildebrand all through the subsequent Middle Ages and post-Tridentine times to our own day? Only an upholder of a now *démodé* triumphalist ecclesiology would find any difficulty here. I mean a difficulty for faith. But if we hold by the vision of the pilgrim Church, so strongly stressed by Vatican II—the *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a Church for which the vicissitudes of God's people in Old Testament times are of direct relevance as a constant lesson and warning of what can take place even under Christ's New Covenant—then there is no difficulty for our faith in admitting this contamination.

This is a grave charge, because such contamination stands under the judgment of our Lord's own words. Nevertheless it seems a valid historical judgment that some measure of contamination is a fact. Notice we say contamination, not total corruption (this being a word an English Dominican must be careful about . . .). As I have said before, I am far from wishing to deny that there *may* well have been authentic doctrinal development as regards Church authority in every age in the Church. Yet to some extent there has also been contamination. How else explain the different *faces* that Church authority has presented to the world—of overlordship in the middle ages and of the Renaissance absolute prince since the sixteenth century? Why, in complete contrast with the New Testament state of affairs, has the laity so little part in Church affairs; why is the choice of bishops ultimately a papal affair, the local community having absolutely no say in it at all (contrast Leo the Great: *qui praefuturus est omnibus, ab omnibus eligatur*, *Ep.* 10, 4) just as in the case of appointment of parish priests also; why the absence of consultation of all levels in the Church on burning questions and problems of the day, including matters of doctrine; why the suspicious attitude

adopted to all fresh theological thought and to anything to which the name of prophecy within the Church could be given?

These questions are, of course, just those that are being felt and voiced in the Church today. It is no longer possible for them to be high-handedly brushed aside as 'impudent', as it would have been so possible as recently as prior to John XXIII. No doubt there are many actual office-holders in the Church who feel in their heart of hearts that they are impudent. But even these (except the most dinosauric types) must be aware that these questions are not illegitimate ones.

Their legitimacy has a two-fold source (and this is simply a summing up of everything we have been saying so far). Firstly, the realization that mankind and the Church are today at a pivotal point of change in their history. In this situation, the Church must change (not, of course, in the essentials of doctrine and of structure, which are not under question here). And, of course, the Church is aware of this. Vatican II was the evident sign of this, as the commitment to a movement of renewal in the Church so that she and her Gospel message might become less incredible to the men of our time. Vatican II even made a beginning on the matter of the structures and exercise of authority in the Church, which is probably one of the greatest obstacles to credibility. Only a beginning. The sad thing is that in the highest circles of Church authority since the Council, so far from this impetus being carried loyally forward, there has been rather a fearful (and sometimes tearful) withdrawal into the attitudes of pre-Conciliar times. It is hard not to think of this in terms of a grave and fundamental disloyalty to the spirit and teaching of Vatican II. The English *Catholic Herald* for October contained the following astonishing quotation from the *Osservatore Romano*: 'Pope Pius XII was afraid of taking paths other than that of direct teaching; and what happened in later years at *Pope John's Council* and is happening today, certainly does not dispel such misgivings' (italics mine). Of course the *Osservatore Romano* is not Pope Paul, but it is a reflection of the mind of those curial advisers who surround Popes, and in the present persisting structures of papal authority make it supremely difficult for any Pope to be other than a prisoner of the Vatican.

The second source that makes the current questioning of authority legitimate is a much more important one. It is simply the permanent norm and judgment which, as we have seen, the New Testament provides.

Thus we see that both the revealed word of God and what might be called the *signa temporum*, the signs of the times, combine to produce a real crisis of authority in the Church. The present structures (or rather ideological superstructures) of authority are, and *ought* to be, under this authentic judgment.

(To be concluded)