

REFLECTIONS ON THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH¹

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

TO the eye of faith, and so of theology, there is no authentic Christianity apart from the Catholic Church, and the Church has an inward pattern or design centred on Christ. I say 'inward' to imply that this pattern is not visible to the historian as such. History can only show the development of the Church as an institution making certain claims: to interpret these historical data in terms of that pattern is the work of theology.

The pattern might be represented by two lines drawn from a central point. The point is Christ, both Saviour and Word; the lines are a line of 'grace' passing through sacraments to the souls of men, and a line of truth passing through faith and teaching to their minds. Grace and truth combine in Christ, and of this fulness we have all received;² but grace in one way and truth in another. Life and light, identical in Christ, reach us through distinct media within the one Church: grace through the sacraments, and supremely in the Eucharist; truth through faith and the Church's articulation of the faith and in the rules wherewith she applies it to the details of conduct. In both communications the Church, we believe, is necessary. But the manner of her mediation differs in each case.

Where sanctifying grace is concerned the Church is purely God's instrument, in the most limited sense of the term.³ Her task here is simply to effect the sacred sign, to consecrate, for example, the host and administer it; the rest—granted the recipient's response—is all God's work. The Church here is a mere vehicle of a divine action; and this in virtue of the power conferred on every priest at ordination. And so limited is the human share in this sanctification through the sacraments that the priest's personal moral quality makes no difference at all to the degree of grace transmitted. He has but to effect the sign which God uses. For

¹ If any reader finds these remarks too dogmatic, I can only plead the need for brevity.

² John 1, 14-17.

³ *Summa Theol.*, III, 63, 5 ad 2. 'Ratio . . . instrumenti consistit in hoc quod ab alio moveatur.' Cf. *ibid.*, 62, 1 and 4.

God has made the saving of this world as far as possible—granted the existence of a visible Church at all—independent of the human factor. An unworthy clergy can and does mediate Christ to the world.

Such is one thread in the design: the other contrasts with and completes it. For the Church's task of conveying truth is much less merely instrumental, it implies all the *human* activity of teaching and guiding and governing; all the rendering articulate to the human mind of the content of faith and its practical consequences, according to the great conclusion of St Matthew's Gospel: 'All power is given to me in heaven and on earth. Going therefore, teach all nations . . . teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all days.' These words combine the teaching and the ruling functions or powers of the Apostles; expressing them as the doctrinal and legislative sides of a single authority coming through Christ from the Father. Nowhere in the Scriptures is the tremendous Apostolic claim on the human mind's attention more emphatically asserted; a claim on both speculative judgments ('teaching them') and practical decisions ('to observe', etc.); a claim, one may add, which the Roman See alone has consistently upheld. Thus the declaration of truth is expressly linked with government; the Church is commanded to command the world in the act of being told to teach it. And so combined, these two original Apostolic powers of teaching and ruling may be given the single name 'jurisdiction'. In this sense St Peter's privilege among the Apostles was a special jurisdiction; and so is the Pope's among bishops: but any priest may have jurisdiction in some degree.⁴

If this jurisdictional authority implies a more active human initiative than does the 'power of order', the reason is that the proper effects of jurisdiction, however necessary to the Church, are less divine than those of 'order'. *Solus Deus deificat*,⁵ only God can give divine grace; the instrument is here a mere channel, nothing more; whereas in defining the creed and its consequences the human agent evidently acts as more of a cause in his own right, though of course as a subordinate cause.⁶ It is therefore in virtue of *jurisdictional* authority that titles are given to human agents in

4 In including *magisterium* under *jurisdictio* I follow Ch. Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*, vol. 1, ch. 5: English transl. pp. 156 ss. (Sheed & Ward, 1954).

5 *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 112, 1.

6 cf. Journet, *op. cit.*, ch. 4, §1.

the Church which might have seemed proper to Christ alone: the Apostles are the Church's 'foundation' (Ephes. 2, 20) and Peter is so especially (Matt. 16, 18); and Peter is the shepherd (John 21, 17) and his successor is called 'head' of the visible Church.

But order and jurisdiction, though distinct, are exactly coordinated and interdependent. Without the power of order, jurisdiction would be aimless, for the purpose of the Church is to bring souls into the grace-union with Christ. And without jurisdiction there would be no definition of this purpose and no common rules of conduct in view of it, indeed no visible Church at all in the world as we know it. The two powers together make Christianity a visible reality; they effect the unity of the historic Catholic Church.

This they have always done, but their official elucidation has of course been gradual; and the later Middle Ages, I suggest, offer some particularly interesting examples of it. The reforming movement of the eleventh century, associated with Pope St Gregory VII, completed that 'emancipation of the Church from the Empire' the phases of which have been recently outlined by the very competent pen of Mr Walter Ullmann.⁷ My concern here (and I speak as one less wise) is with the later and further unfolding of the two-sided pattern of the Church's hierarchy as a thing implicit in the priesthood itself. Now this later medieval assertion of the priesthood was made in answer to a long series of attacks, directly or indirectly anti-sacerdotal (it seems to me) and more or less dangerous, but all anticipating in one way or another the great assault of the sixteenth century. For the common feature of nearly all medieval heresy was anti-sacerdotalism—sometimes fully and explicitly anti-sacramental, sometimes only politically anti-clerical, and sometimes a mid-way attitude which combined an apparent belief in the sacraments with error about the minister of the sacraments. And it was in reply to the second and third of these forms of attack that the later medieval Church developed her teaching on order and jurisdiction.

It may be recalled that the Church entered the high Middle Ages as a *western* thing. She was reduced to this, first by the Moslem invasions and then by the Eastern Schism. So reduced, however, she enters our period undivided in creed and government. Her Trinitarian and Christological foundations were by

⁷ *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages* (London, 1955).

now defined, and no schism immediately threatened the Roman supremacy in the West. It was on other aspects of creed and discipline that the new threats were to bear: on the sacraments, wholly or in part, on the philosophical presuppositions to the faith, and (an old threat revived in new Aristotelian forms) on the Church's claim to control in some sense the civil power. Later, from the early fourteenth century, a threat began to emerge from within the clerical body itself, against the hierarchy as such and the Papacy in particular—the subversive agitations of men like Ockham and Wyclif and Huss.

Apart from the Albigensian denials and the intermittent purely philosophical criticisms, the chief threat to Catholicism between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries was a recurrent heretical 'evangelism'. This concerned (a) the role of the priest as minister of the sacraments, (b) the independence and authority of the Church with respect to the civil power, and (c) the Church's right to possess property. The first of these threats bore directly on the power of order; the second and third attacked, directly or indirectly, the power of jurisdiction.⁸

The Papacy's immense effort, from the eighth century onwards, to win the Church self-government in spiritual matters and especially in the appointment of her ministers, turned out to be more successful as an assertion of principle than as a determination of practice. In fact the Church usually had to compromise with the Catholic princes, to the point of lowering her powers of resistance when the storm broke in the sixteenth century, notably in England. It is perhaps significant that towards the end of our period, at the Council of Constance (1414-18), what, it was felt, needed to be upheld was less the Church's independence of princes than her doctrinal authority over all her children. The pressure had advanced from the political to the religious sphere. The old conflict of civil and ecclesiastical jurisdictions within the one Catholic order did not of course die with the Middle Ages; but the point of greatest tension was steadily shifting inwards to a sphere where the Church's jurisdiction was faced by the individual conscience appealing to a supposed primitive institution of Christianity minus the hierarchy or at least minus the Papacy. Problems were arising which the old formulae had hardly

⁸ Ockham combines these two in his polemic against the Court of Avignon: cf. G. de Lagarde, *La Naissance de l'Esprit Laïque*, etc., Vol. IV.

envisaged. The situation at the close of the Middle Ages, so far as ecclesiastical jurisdiction was concerned, might be summarized by saying that the Church had for long asserted, but was far from having achieved, her due independence of the State; and had asserted in general terms, but not yet displayed with all the precision required by the age that was now beginning, her spiritual authority over both the state and the individual conscience.⁹ These last issues indeed are still being clarified.

The argument about the Church's ownership of property, so vital in the fourteenth century (Dante joined in with *Monarchia* III, ch. 10), had been definitely settled in principle and was not seriously to trouble her again.¹⁰

Equally final was the definition of the power of order as a thing essentially distinct from personal holiness. Affirmed against the Waldenses in 1208, against the Fraticelli in 1317, against Wyclif in 1418, this distinction is a major achievement of medieval Catholicism.¹¹ It represented an increasingly firm grasp of the *instrumental* nature of the *potestas ordinis*, and consequently of the essentially divine effect of the sacraments. Superficially an admission of the 'human' element in the Church—the compatibility of priesthood with sinfulness—it is fundamentally an affirmation of God's activity in the work of the Church and of the priest's entire subordination to Christ. Aimed at an evangelism which damned the clergy by reference to the moral standard of Christ, it vindicates Christ's authority at a deeper level; stating that he so transcends his instrument as to be unhampered, in principle, by the latter's imperfection. The Church's subordination to Christ could not be more firmly grounded.

And by thus tracing the power of order back to its source, the medieval Church was only reaffirming St Paul's recall to the 'one Lord' from whom the Corinthians had been led astray by mistaken loyalties to human agents, to Paul himself or Cephas or Apollo.¹² Thus the principle that 'God gives the increase' was secured; and that priests as such are mere tools of Christ, centred in him as the common source of their actions. But what of the power of

⁹ The State as a *separate* entity never seems to have been considered by medieval thinkers.

Mr Ullmann says that the distinction drawn was 'not between Church and State, but between clergy and laity as parts of one . . . unit.' (*op. cit.*, p. 2.)

¹⁰ Denzinger, 494, 495-6, 596, 619, etc.

¹¹ Denzinger, 424, 486, 584: *Summa Theol.*, III, 64, 5.

¹² 1 Cor. I, 10-13; 3, 4-8; Ephes. 4, 5.

jurisdiction? Here the medieval Church's effort at self-definition had, I suggest, two chief results. First, in line with Apostolic tradition,¹³ she had clearly affirmed against the civil power that she is not subject to it. Secondly, in respect of her own scope and purpose, she had affirmed her mission to all men in the very act of so starkly asserting her authority over all. When Boniface VIII made the classic statement of this point, defining in *Unam Sanctam* that every human creature is subject to the Roman Pontiff, he was not declaring a merely canonical authority to legislate for the baptized; he was declaring his Apostolic authority to preach the gospel to all nations (Matt. 28, 18-20) and so his right, in principle, to be heard and obeyed by all.¹⁴ Now both these affirmations are Apostolic and based on Scripture.

No one would now acquit the rulers of the medieval Church of all responsibility for the rebellions which their faults—ambition, exaggerations, avarice, harshness—in part provoked. The Reformation, when it came, paid off many old scores. But in point of theological principle the 'evangelism' of the Reformers had been largely answered in advance: through her long and stormy medieval experience the Church clung tenaciously to the New Testament.

¹³ Matt. 22, 15-21; Acts 5, 29; 1 Cor. 6, 1-6.

¹⁴ Denzinger, 469.