

# Authority in the Church

## by Robert Nowell

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Any discussion of authority in the Church today must start from the fact that authority in the political sense has become a dirty word. To adapt a saying originally coined by Sir William Harcourt in 1889 and given wider currency by the future King Edward VII in 1895, we are all anarchists now. There was a time when authority was given the benefit of the doubt: unless there was glaring evidence to the contrary, it was assumed that those in authority knew what they were doing and thus commanded our obedience; and even if the matter was analysed further and it was admitted that authority could make mistakes, it was thought better that the wrong decision should be made and applied immediately than that any decision should be deferred until it might be too late. Today our assumptions tend to work the other way. We assume that those in authority will lurch from blunder to blunder, and we no longer see any great virtue in muddling through: it is apt to be a messy and expensive business.

This cannot be put down simply to a widespread cynicism alleged to exist as part of a supposed far-reaching malaise affecting the whole of our national life today. Indeed, there is some justification, if not for cynicism, at least for scepticism: our governments since the war seem to have been singularly unable to avoid leading us into one economic crisis after another, and when we are encouraged to swallow yet another dose of deflationary medicine we cannot help wondering if this cannot do more than alleviate the immediate symptoms of our economic ill-health.

But the roots of this distrust of authority go back farther than the post-war period. There are, I think, two major causes. One is the incredibly high loss of life during the first world war. The other is the dictatorships of the thirties. Although the loss of life during the 1914-18 war might not seem so terrible to a generation that is learning to count in megadeaths and that hears spoken of as acceptable casualties on a scale that would have shocked even the generals of that time, it was not so much the enormous losses as their pointlessness that brought authority into suspicion: draft after draft was slaughtered in the mud of Flanders, and all apparently to little avail. Even if wars were to be regarded as useful and necessary, this was clearly not the way to conduct them. Authority had not merely blundered but blundered on such a scale and so publicly that it could never again exercise the same fascination over those subject to

it: those in power did not necessarily know any better than those who were not, and sometimes they knew far worse.

As if this were not enough, in the 1930s came Nazi Germany to give a terrible example of what happens when authority is given the benefit of the doubt and is totally unworthy of that trust. This is most clearly shown by what must, I think, ultimately be accounted the failure of the Catholic Church to protest with adequate vigour. Although during the three years before Hitler finally came to power the German bishops had shown their opposition to the Nazis and had stated that Nazism and Christianity were incompatible, once Hitler had actually gained legal power by ostensibly legal means there was a kind of caving in. This was partly due to the Communist bogey leading many Catholics to regard Hitler as the lesser of two evils, as was shown by the Catholic Centre Party joining in voting Hitler the plenary powers he wanted before dissolving itself. It was also, however, an expression of the long-engrained doctrine of obedience to lawful authority. In addition, I suspect that many people, both inside and outside Germany, thought the realities of power would have a sobering effect on the Nazis: they could not really intend to put into practice the nonsense they had been preaching. At all events, Catholic protest did tend to be somewhat muted during the early years of the Nazi régime by the aura of legality which surrounded Hitler; and the Catholic Church itself had contributed significantly to that aura of legality by hurrying to complete a Concordat with the Nazi State during the first year of its existence. Perhaps if those outside and inside Germany had not been so willing to give the Nazis that benefit of the doubt that is one of the main advantages of those in power, things would have turned out differently: it is doubtful whether they could have turned out any worse.

The reason for all this discussion of authority in the secular world and the way in which today we stand considerably less in awe of it than our grandfathers did is that authority in the Church tends to follow the political patterns set by the secular world. But the Church is an intensely conservative institution, as befits a body one of whose primary tasks is to bear witness to certain unique events which took place over nineteen hundred years ago. Hence with the Church there has been a time-lag, and attitudes towards authority which the secular world has long since outgrown are apt to be found fossilised within it like flies in amber: a symptom of this is the way some of our bishops still like to be addressed and treated with the deference due to a mediaeval robber-baron.

One effect of the Reformation and the emphasis which the Catholic reaction to it placed on the defensive, conservative and traditional aspects of the Church was enormously to increase this time-lag. As a result, it is only now that the Church is emerging from the age of absolutism which in the secular world began to decay with the

French and American revolutions: I am not saying, of course, that political authority in the secular world is everywhere a model of what can for the sake of brevity be described as democratic principles, only that it is significant that democratic principles are held in such high esteem that they are laid claim to even by those governments which in practice do least to uphold them. Nor has absolutism in the Church been solely due to the following of secular models: many other factors have been at work to bring about the increasing centralization that has marked the exercise of authority in the Western Church up to the summoning of the Second Vatican Council. There was, first of all, the nature of the struggles between Church and State in the Middle Ages, which led to the papacy accumulating more and more power over local Churches. The post-Reformation monarchies, in which kings exerted themselves to control the whole life of their subjects, including their religious life, meant that the centralization of ecclesiastical power in Rome could act as a safeguard for the freedom of the Church, which otherwise stood in danger of being reduced to a department of State. Perhaps more importantly, there was in operation what seems to be a law of political development: that, if matters which fall within the competence of a local authority can be referred to the central authority for arbitration in the case of insoluble disputes, then gradually more and more initiative will be taken over by the central authority from the local authorities. And the entire process has been helped and encouraged by the development of rapid means of communication, which means that it is not at first sight impractical for some question to be referred to Rome for solution—thought in fact such questions were so referred even in an age when slow communications imposed what we should regard as intolerable delays, as with the disputes arising from the apostolates of Fr Roberto de Nobili in India and Fr Matteo Ricci in China.

This time-lag, then, helps to explain a lot of the tension which is aroused by the exercise of authority within the Church today. In the secular world the right of people to be consulted in matters affecting them is at least paid lip-service to; but in the Church we are still bound by structures reflecting a belief in the divine right of kings, which in actual fact all too often means the divine right of the royal entourage. The position is complicated by the way in which the papacy is of divine right in a manner to which no earthly monarchy could ever lay claim, but the parallel holds good when applied to the papal entourage: the Curia's abuse of its powers is notorious and calls for little emphasis. There is no need for me to quote here the classic defence of the Holy Office when that venerable institution was under attack at the Council: that those who were attacking the Holy Office were attacking the Pope. The Holy Office, after all, was the first of the Curial departments to be reformed, and in its new guise of the Doctrinal Congregation it shows signs of settling down to a

role that is advisory and consultative rather than judicial and commanding. More disturbing evidence of continuing absolutism is provided by such decisions as that monks shall continue to say the divine office in choir in Latin, when a considerable number of monks—the majority, in fact, in some congregations—want to use their native languages for what is the most important part of their life and work as monks, the solemn worship of God as a community: it is interesting that a number of religious orders have got permission to use the vernacular when lay-people are present, which leads one to suppose that determined efforts will be made to ensure that lay-people are always present during the recitation of the divine office in these monasteries. Another example is the way in which communities of enclosed nuns who have decided that the grille is no longer a valid symbol of their separation from the world in the twentieth century, but is rather a hindrance to the world's understanding what their vocation consists of, have difficulty in getting permission to remove them: indeed, I have heard of one community which was ordered to replace the grilles it had removed in a fit of *aggiornamento*.

The point of these examples is not to indulge in the popular sport of Curia-bashing but to underline the way in which decisions which have been arrived at by communities of sober and responsible men and women and which are fully in keeping with the mind of the Church as expressed in the recent Council, have nevertheless been overruled by equally sober and responsible men who, because of the supervisory task they have been entrusted with, regard such wishes as somehow conflicting with the needs of the Church as a whole. Authority exercised in this manner is apt to remind us of a querulous nanny spending her time finding out what her charges are doing and telling them not to. But we must admit that there is a case for the exercise of this kind of negative authority, when we recall the strange religious enthusiasms that have swept across Europe in the past and the alleged apparitions of our Lady with vague prophecies of foreboding in obscure corners of Europe (I am not referring to Lourdes), though it is clear that it has been exercised in far too heavy-handed and restrictive a manner in the past and that such abuses of authority are still too common in the present.

The tension, then, is likely to continue between authority and enthusiasm, between those who, if they are doing their job properly and are not simply abusing their powers, are aware of what certain practices or beliefs will mean in a context that is universal both in time and in space and those who are aware of what these practices or beliefs will mean for them in the particular environment in which they are here and now engaged. This is to put this tension in the best light, but there are in fact three good reasons why it can reasonably be hoped that the exercise of such supervisory authority will diminish in the Church of the future. One is the ever-present possibility of its

being abused: of this we are today only too well aware, and there is no need to labour the point. Another is that one factor which has played a large part in disposing such authority towards a somewhat nervous caution is largely diminishing in the modern world: this factor is the fear that people are not sufficiently mature to have learned to agree to differ, and that lack of uniformity will breed dissension and schism. Such an attitude is, I think, diminishing, both because of higher standards of education throughout the world, but also because the possibility of nuclear destruction is forcing us, as a community of widely differing peoples, to learn to live and let live in a way that has never been necessary before.

With the third we come to the crux of the entire question of authority in the Church, and this is tied up with the whole business of Christian freedom. It is axiomatic that our redemption is a many-sided exercise of freedom. The essential point is that man's response to God's free gift of grace must be equally free: he must be free either to accept it or to reject it, and his response is devalued the greater the coercion to which he is subject. Moreover, this freedom needs to extend throughout his life: there should be no question of the gates clanging shut behind him once he has made this choice in order to save him from hypothetical danger, for all that this was the kind of attitude engendered by the siege-mentality under which the Church has been labouring for the past few centuries. For one thing, given the kind of life that most of us lead it is extremely rare for any of us to be faced with the type of once-and-for-all life-or-death choice that such a theory supposes: it may happen, but it is unlikely that any of us will find ourselves faced with the stark alternatives of apostasy or death that is an essential condition of martyrdom. What normally happens is a slow accumulation of minor choices, with the ever-present possibility that when faced with one of these choices we may make the wrong one; and we have to remain free up to the last moment. Hence not only should there be no coercion in matters of religion outside the Church; there should be no such coercion within it either.

Saying this, however, does not mean arguing that mere anarchy should be loosed upon the Church. It merely means arguing that authorities in the Church should try always to exercise this authority over the rest of us in the way that God exercises his authority over us; which is not by coercing us into doing what is right but by helping us to make up our own minds to do what is right. Each of us has to work out his or her own individual salvation, which is never an easy process, involving as it normally does much suffering and anxiety; but, although it is something in which we can be helped and guided immeasurably by the advice and example of others, it is not something which can be taken over completely by others. Too often in the past the impression has been given that this was precisely what Catholics not merely could but should do: all the important decisions

would be made for them by expert theologians, and all they need do was carry out orders. I am, of course, exaggerating slightly; and such a system was in any case unworkable, because most areas of human behaviour are not susceptible of the cut-and-dried moral analysis involved. But in the few cases where it has been possible to apply such a system, as with contraception, the results have been uniformly disastrous.

Hence we may hope to see a shift in the pattern of exercising authority, from condemnatory and prohibitive to admonitory and exhortative. It may still unhappily be necessary for the Church to declare that certain beliefs and opinions are in fact incompatible with what God has revealed to us through his Son, or that certain persons are advocating such beliefs and opinions with such conviction and zeal that they can no longer be regarded as full members of the Christian community. But when authority has to be exercised in the Church in this way it is to be hoped that it will differ both in matter and in manner from some similar exercises in the past.

First of all, the matter should be confined strictly to what is essential to the Christian faith. It is only to be expected that one effect of centuries of meditation on what Christ taught us should have been a tendency perpetually to extend the field covered, to use the insights we have gained from our religion to light up aspects of our experience that were hitherto shrouded in darkness. This tendency has been reinforced by the inability of the Western European intellect ever to stop half-way, to admit that we can see thus far and no farther: it has always wanted to take things to their logical conclusions, and sometimes beyond. Hence there has grown up an enormous amount of what might be termed peripheral orthodoxy, the illusion that certainty is possible for the Christian on a comparatively wide range of subjects where we are in fact doomed to uncertainty this side of the grave. This development, which perhaps reached its culmination in the Syllabus of Errors, and which should in no way be confused with the legitimate development of doctrine such as led to the Christological definitions of the early Councils and the Mariological definitions of our own day, has been all the more harmful in that it took place almost entirely within one cultural context, so that the Church's essential task of preaching the gospel to every creature was made the more difficult, and unnecessarily so, in a world the majority of whose inhabitants are not Western Europeans. With the Council the danger has been recognized, and it now seems likely that an age of theological pluriformity will succeed the rigid uniformity we have grown used to.

There is also need for a far greater admission of pluriformity in matters of discipline and practice, such as the liturgy. Nothing, surely, could be more unnatural than for peoples of widely differing cultures to be forced to celebrate their Eucharists according to the same pattern and still, to some extent, in the same dead alien tongue.

While the central authority should rightly be concerned to see that these various Eucharists are all valid Eucharists, it is surely going against the principle of subsidiarity that it has been so fond of in political and economic matters for it to regulate the details of the liturgy so minutely. What in fact one may reasonably look for in this field is the growth of local liturgies, in the same way that the original liturgy instituted by our Lord the night before he suffered developed in the early centuries into a pattern of different rites.

Secondly, when we come to the manner in which authority is exercised the primary assumption should be that those subject to this authority are, basically, mature, responsible and committed Christians doing their best to apply their beliefs to the world in which they live and to understand them more deeply: after all, it is increasingly only committed Christians who belong to the Church anyway in our present society. This means that the greatest care needs to be taken to ensure not only that those in authority know what is going on and who is saying what but also that they know the background against which this is all taking place and the reasons behind it all. And this brings us up against the problem of communication within the Church. At present there are various obstacles to the free communication that should exist between different members of the Body of Christ. One is that different members speak different languages, not in the sense of one talking English and another Chinese, but in the sense of one thinking in terms derived ultimately from, say, Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein and another in terms derived ultimately from Aristotle and Aquinas—often enough without either having any direct contact with the original sources of their mental categories. Another is that the past emphasis on the Church's juridical structure has inhibited those towards the bottom of this structure from speaking freely in the hearing of those towards the top: a barrier has been set up, and the pressure needed to overcome it is one of the explanations of the popularity of bishop-bashing among English Catholic intellectuals. Nor has communication been helped by an insistence on orthodoxy at all costs, and indeed on what I have termed peripheral orthodoxy, so that a very cold welcome was given to those who attempted to raise perfectly legitimate questions, for example on the validity of the Church's ban on contraception or the usefulness of the present discipline of clerical celibacy in the Western Church.

Authority, then, needs to listen; but when it comes to speak it must make clear the reasons for what it says. The ultimate reason why we accept the authority of the Church is because it is true, and so when authority speaks it should not content itself with a bald statement but should give the reasons behind its statement or decision in terms that carry conviction with those to whom it is addressed. And it should do this succinctly, so that there is a good chance of both statement and reasons being reported by the press and other means of com-

munication and so reaching those to whom they are addressed. This does not always happen. Two recent examples are the decree reforming the Holy Office and the decree reforming indulgences: in both cases it was the detailed provisions that were reported in the secular press, which after all is the chief means by which most of us learn about what is happening in the Church; in both cases the doctrinal preamble, which was by far the most interesting and encouraging part of each document, went largely unreported.

Moreover, because what it is concerned to uphold and to bear witness to is the truth, authority can afford to take a more relaxed view of its responsibilities. If the truth is under attack, what ultimately will overcome it is not repression of the opposing falsehood but its refutation by letting it be compared with the truth it is opposed to. It may be that the fact that the truth is under attack is a symptom, indicating that we do not yet understand enough about this particular aspect of the truth: in which case once again the answer is not repression but a deeper and more painstaking study.

Finally, there are three points I would like to emphasize. One is that it is wrong to look upon authority in the Church exclusively in distinction and opposition to the Church as a whole: it is probably more correct to see it as the means whereby the beliefs of the whole Christian community are made articulate, whereby their needs and anxieties are given expression, whereby their practical charity and concern are organised into effectiveness. Too often authority and community have been separated, a separation in theory leading to a separation in practice, and this has worked only to the detriment of both.

Secondly, there is likely to be always a tension between authority and freedom in the Church, but this can be used to the benefit of the entire Christian community if both sides to any dispute that may arise stop and ask themselves why the dispute has arisen: it may, as I have just pointed out, be a symptom of something far more serious which both sides really need to co-operate in investigating.

Finally, one of the Church's duties is to bear witness in the world, and part of the way in which the Church should bear this witness is by Christians exemplifying the grace they have been given in their behaviour. From this aspect the exercise of authority in the Church should be a paradigm for the exercise of authority in the secular world. There have been too many occasions in the past when it has been the other way around. What we should be working towards is a situation in which it will no longer be a cynical jibe if someone should say: 'See how these Christians love one another!'