

Papalism Ancient and Modern (III)

by Eric John

I should like now to sum up the discussion so far, trying to show that what I have been saying does not depend only on what to many will seem a queer and barbarous jargon. To put it in other words: the triumphalist, because he lacks the insight social studies give, does not realize that not only do other minds exist but other kinds of authority, other patterns of government and social living which he does not know. Every one of them has a right to participate in the Church. No one has the right to say that what exists now is the only pattern and must be accepted as a condition of entry. What is the triumphalist pattern? Their pope is a Lord Chief Justice dispensing authoritative justice in a court of law. A man who must be guarded by strict rules of *laesae majestatis* lest the law be brought into disrepute. The sort of man who reproached Peter Damian when he criticized the late pope, St Leo IX, for recruiting a gang of ruffians to fight the Normans for him under all the trappings of a Holy War. He received the unanswerable reply, We don't call David a saint for his relations with Bathsheba. But it takes more than commonsense to silence a triumphalist. In the case of a secular judge, one can see that rules of *laesae majestatis* are essential. When one reads the Warren Report, our own Lord Denning's report on the Profumo affair, or studies the conduct of the trials of the late Stephen Ward, or the late Timothy Evans, one sees that without the protection of such rules, men might take the judiciary to be the guardians of any and every kind of interest group but never justice. A pope although he interprets rules and lays down laws is not a judge of this kind. He must be just or he is nothing, he has resources denied to a secular judge and he does not need special protection from criticism. Indeed his kind of office requires that he get it.

The pope in my view is much more like a referee or an umpire, a man exercising his judicial authority in a game not a court of law. He is there to penalize foul-play and send really hard cases off, to decide how the rules apply to this particular case or that. But, as with any game, the rules are prior to the start. They must be roughly known and generally accepted by all participants. Clearly if two teams oppose each other, if one follows the rules of rugby and the other soccer, this is not a game. This is not altogether adequate even in terms of the analogy, because the pope is more than a simple referee. This is a power he shares with the rest of the clergy but he has more authority than they because he, like the MCC or the

Football League, has a power of last resort that can up to a point make new rules and change old ones. The point of the analogy is to show that judges and law courts are not the only possible models of authority, and it is surely obvious that the growth of the Church, the extension of its structure with its peculiar dependence on an inner consent is much more like a game people play because they enjoy it and implicitly accept the rules, than it is like a law court where interests are protected and rights are enforced, and where self-interest, not the inner consent upon which the Church's power rests, is the dominant force in some degree.

If this is so then papal authority cannot be like a Lord Chief Justice's in many ways. For instance, the Church cannot afford a pope who offers the pompous platitudes which distinguished judges take their office as a licence to utter. Another is that the game absolutely requires the referee's decision be taken as final, whilst the combat is on. But because the game can only be renewed so long as the players want to play it, because the nature of the game is entirely determined by the rules accepted, the referee's decisions must be constantly scrutinized: if a mistake has been made once, the damage can be rectified a little by not making the same mistake again. Who minds if popes make mistakes so long as they try their best and are prepared to acknowledge errors, from which a *deus*, but not a *sanctus*, is alone free? If a referee consistently penalizes innocent players and overlooks fouls, he is destroying the game itself. If the Church could be destroyed, what more efficient way of doing it than to tolerate the defiance of Cardinals who publicly bless the massacre of innocents of Christmas Day whilst silencing an honest theologian for saying what everyone knows is true? Even less like the power of a secular legislative or executive is the pope's power of making new law.

Here again the MCC will be helpful. The MCC can alter the number of balls bowled in an over, or if under changing circumstances certain types of bowling may become dangerous, then these can be proscribed, and so on. Most of the innovations the pope makes are of this type. Liturgical constitutions, changes in fasting rules and so on, are what I have in mind. The very fact that innovation on this level is possible, and I think many people ignorant of modern anthropological writings sometimes fail to see how fundamental liturgical innovations are, requires that constant scrutiny be kept of where good rules are becoming bad rules. This simply cannot be left to the pope of the day. Where can he get his information from? From the actual players, as the MCC does: it is this essential contact between the charismatic and its routinization that the triumphalist obscures. Now this activity is quite vital; just as the game of cricket would be dead if the MCC insisted on playing it in exactly the same way as in W. G. Grace's day, so the Church would die if the charismatic sector were entirely sealed off as it would be if triumphalist papalism ever got its entire way.

Where on this view does infallibility come in? Where in the analogy is there room for the *ex cathedra* pronouncement? It is difficult explaining what *ex cathedra* means anyway just because this kind of authority is quite unique, but it does have a family resemblance to some of the activities of a body like the MCC. For a game to exist at all there are certain rules so fundamental they cannot be changed without ending or changing the game. There are certain parts of Christian Doctrine of this kind too. The belief that the eucharist is more than a memorial, or the reality of the Incarnation, seem to me of this type. Surely this is the function of the pope's infallible authority, to maintain the essential rules without which the game would become another thing? From time to time in the light of experience the formal expression of the rules will need revision to prevent them losing their power of comprehension, and as is the way with that extraordinary thing, language, this of itself sometimes throws new light on the old doctrines. Essentially however it must be the same rule and must be seen to be the same. Anything less individualistic than such an activity cannot be imagined: what precisely the best machinery is for safeguarding this vital activity I don't think the Church has yet decided, as in the middle of the eleventh century it hadn't decided exactly how it wanted to choose a pope.

There is however another sort of occasion for an infallible decision which illuminates further the very important and very imperfectly understood idea of *ex cathedra*. The MCC may not abolish the wicket or runs without ending the game; it may vary the length of an over, can it alter the distance between the wickets? At first the answer seems to be that if it can vary the number of balls in an over, it can alter the length of the pitch. In fact it cannot, because to do so would be so to destroy the traditional notions of what is meant by bowling and batting as to mean the jettisoning of the cumulative experience of years of cricket. In the Church, neither the pope nor anyone else makes any official decision about what happened at Lourdes or Fatima—even if many churchmen act as though in fact such a decision had been taken. On the triumphalist view we get at this point creeping infallibility, or a situation where if a pope shows that as a person he accepts the cult of Fatima, it is *laesae majestatis* to reject that cult even if it has absolutely no authority other than the personal testimony of particularly individuals. Setting this aside, if the Church does not pronounce about apparitions of the Virgin at Lourdes or Fatima, could it not take a similar attitude to the doctrine of the Assumption? In my opinion it could not, and this again is where the function of infallibility comes in. Just as at first sight the alteration of the length of the pitch seems to be in the same class as the varying of the length of the over but is not because it would destroy the nature of the game, so in this the parallel between apparitions and the great Mariological doctrines cannot hold.

Catholics do not venerate the Mother of God so as to give us all a Jungian mother figure but because this is necessary if the reality of the paradoxical but quite essential doctrine of the Incarnation of God into human flesh is to be maintained. It is fairly obvious that where Mariolatry has been diminished, belief in the humanity of Christ has a marked tendency to follow. Then in turn comes scepticism about his divinity, because what use is a belief in a divine emanation which cannot suffer to anyone except the sort of people who go to séances and display an inordinate curiosity in the utterances of Red Indian chiefs from the Other Side?

I want to argue then that papal authority has two distinct, if not separate, aspects. The conservative one of keeping the game going, one which is concerned with infallible decisions, and the radical, innovating one which is concerned with charisma and *Veralltägliclichung*—the Church's means of coping with the Holy Spirit, as it might be put. In no way can these functions be properly performed without open examination and a considerable area of free discussion. Nor can a pope do his job properly if he is free from criticism. On inspecting tradition it doesn't seem that criticism must always be restrained. One has only to read the sort of thing with which Columbanus threatened the pope of his day if he didn't do his duty or the extraordinary diatribes a Bernard poured out over the corrupt, as he saw it, Rome of his day to see this. Remember again that it wasn't *S^t Columbanus* or that sentimental patron of a breed of shaggy dogs who exercised a licence given to them by their sanctity. It was two obscure and uncouth abbots who might in some ages have been burnt. It was one of the notes of the medieval Church that dies out just before the Reformation that whatever their faults, most bishops, popes included, were always ready to bear a good deal of criticism from quite obscure, even odd, persons if necessary, if they suspected the Holy Spirit was speaking to them through these uncouth mouths. In the cases I have cited they were quite right. But look at the care and attention with which a crackpot like Margery Kemp was treated. When the triumphalist tries to surround the pope's words with a hedge of divine immunity from criticism, he may flatter the man but he is silencing the God; he is also behaving most untraditionally.

So much for the argument. I should like in conclusion to answer certain obvious criticisms in advance. What I have *not* done is make a tendentious selection of examples from the Church's past to support a tendentious case. I have made a model by taking examples from key-points in the Church's growth (essential stages, to use Kierkegaard's word), and I have sought to ask in each case a standard set of questions about who did what, why, with what result, and from this made an addition to my model: an addition that imposed itself. Of course I may have given the wrong answers to what, however, I am sure are the right questions and I stand open to correction. But a lot of thought and a lot of work went into these answers, and though

there may be mistakes, they will not turn out to be silly ones. The upshot of the argument, what the model shows most clearly to my mind, is that given the nature of human groups that social science is beginning to disclose, the only kind of structure that could maintain an essentially face-to-face confrontation between an incarnate God and individual men widely dispersed amongst social classes and cultural milieux, and separated by place and generation, is what I have called the apostolic structure. I do not think that anything like the Christian Church could be maintained without an apostolic succession of popes, bishops, and ordained clergy.

My argument, then, is for a very high doctrine of papalism, but it is in nothing more medieval than in deriving its attitude to the pope from a prior, much greater concern for the papacy. It is because the papacy is so important to the Church that one cannot assume an attitude of uncritical prostration before the pope of the day as though he were a caliph or Chairman Mao. The whole point of my model is to draw attention to the essentially functional status the papacy and the clergy generally have in the Church. It seems to me that in the light of this two things are plain: firstly, there has been and still is a non-functional attitude to authority by which stress is laid on the status of popes and bishops at the expense of the function; secondly, because of this the proper performance of the function is inhibited because pride of status erects rules of *laesae majestatis* where no majesty exists. This is why the usual note of reverence in discussions about anything papal is quite absent here. Not for any lack of respect but because this usual ambience of reverence for the pope's person is a direct enemy of the understanding the nature and functioning of the pope's job.

I am sure that this will be an unfamiliar line to many who will find it difficult to believe that any right-minded person can say anything true about the papacy except on bended knees. I had occasion a few years ago to edit a set of brief papal biographies which was widely criticized for its triumphalist tone. The censor saw it somewhat differently. A remark that a pope had several illegitimate children was slanderous, because he had in fact only two. Another remark to the effect that Sergius III was a brutal thug almost provoked apoplexy: which seems odd since Sergius had his predecessor put to death, having seized the papal throne by force and formed some kind of union with a lady of uncertain reputation but much political power and by her had a son who later was 'elected' pope in his turn. These examples are ludicrous but they illustrate an attitude of mind that is damaging to more serious things than learned picture-books on papal history. Does the pope really need flowing white robes, Swiss guards, *décor* by Bernini, and all the pomp of a Renaissance court to buttress his authority? My argument is that he does not. After all, Peter managed well enough without it. Of course the performance of the papal function will always be sur-

rounded by ritual and ceremony of its very nature. But that kind of reverence is provoked by the proper performance of a job well done, and is usually known as respect. Who mattered most: Pius XII and his cult of personality with all those photographs carefully touched up to conceal the pope's age or John XXIII? One wants to say to the Pope, your Holiness is more powerful than you think, you don't need to demand reverence you can have it without asking. The papacy is the one social role to whose occupant the words of the Savoyard vicar certainly apply: 'Sois juste et tu seras heureux'.

There is certainly a perfectly legitimate criticism that can be levelled at my model. It over-simplifies by looking almost wholly at the papacy in its relationships with the faithful. Clearly the existence of dissident Christians, unbelievers and so on brings out other and important aspects of the papacy's function. I have avoided this partly because I am sure that the pope's part in the ecumenical dialogue will be the key to the understanding of this aspect of papal power and what that part is and ought to be is not yet clear. One notices the abuse of the word dialogue for what is in effect an exchange of polite nothings between various brands of prelate. When some comparatively simple proofs of responsible engagement are forthcoming—such as for instance the Church of Scotland repudiating Glasgow Rangers' policy of applying religious tests to football-players or the Scottish hierarchy making Glasgow Celtic stop displaying the flag of the Irish Republic in its customary provocative fashion—then we can talk about dialogue. When this happens on this level—the level it impinges on Protestant and Catholic practices: my example was not in any sense meant to be taken as trivial—then we shall see what light this dialogue throws on the papal function in the world as well as the Church.

There is, then, I think some justification for making the simplifications I have done and ignoring something important but, can I say, secondary? It is the papacy within the context of the Church that we must get right first, and although the rest won't take care of itself, at least it will be possible to cope with it. To sum up, I am reminding us that a pope is first a man by birth, then a Christian by baptism; a full participant in the working of the Church by confirmation; a priest by ordination, then a bishop and lastly a pope. His papacy means nothing outside the context of the Church. The pope in no sense rules the Church, he is there to serve it. We need to remember the literal meaning of *servus servorum dei* and cut through the legalist perversions that have drained it of all its natural sense. The pope is at the Church's command, not the other way round. It is the pope's power, not his authority, that we need to concern ourselves with, if only to remember that the power rests entirely on the willing assent of the consciences of the faithful and any damage to this, with whatever intention, must erode that power. We tend to forget that the doctrine of the high *authority* of the papacy was being asserted in increasingly

extravagant language in the later middle ages with the pope as *deus* and the source from which all political sovereign authority was derived, at the same time as the papacy's *power* was increasingly circumscribed by a political censorship exercised by Catholic kings and princes. Undue respect for the pope's authority is no guarantee of the augmentation of the pope's power. I am appealing against a conservative wish to maintain a *status quo* to a genuine traditionalism that recognizes that the world of *now*, let alone of tomorrow, needs to find the tradition too. One does not repudiate the past by saying new things. We have been taught, truly I believe, that the limits of our language are the limits of our world. When in our own generation the limits of that language have increased in such dramatic ways, it is the traditionalist who seems radical because he must speak of the past from within his enlarging world. The conservative is not defending tradition. He is refusing to accept a task providence has placed before him. Like the ostrich he puts his head in the sand, but at least the ostrich does not delude itself that it is taking a courageous stand to defend pure doctrine.

We should like to apologize for one error and one omission in Part II published last month. Gregory VIII on page 199 should of course have been Gregory VII as in the rest of the article. And the 'great saint' of page 207 was St Dominic.