The Papacy and the Historian III : The New Ekklesia

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The content of any notion of Catholicity must ultimately be referable to, and not incompatible with at the very least, Scripture. But the idea that it can be read out of Scripture as though such notions could be settled in scholarly footnotes to the text is quite mistaken. It is experiences of the development of the Church; discriminations about what went right and what went wrong, that illuminate what we read in Scripture. Now that experience and that development are continuous, so that Scriptural notions of Catholicity need to be scrutinised and refined, if not every generation, at least from time to time, but experience, both of the private and personal, and of the institutional is no more to be got easily than the truth of Scripture by a mere reading of the words on the page. The tendency is to be conservative, to interpret our experience as we have been taught to interpret it, and to accept the institutions of Christianity as we have known them. It is only occasionally, when things break down, when the fallacies we were brought up on, both in our personal experience and the nature of the institutions we have belonged to, are too manifest to be denied, that we are in a position to revalue the nature of Christian experience and particularly that experience of Catholicity that underlies our acceptance of some institutions and rejection of others. It seems to me that the age of the Fathers was very much *not* this kind of age.

Patristic authors have been scrutinised almost as meticulously as the text of Scripture itself for justifications or condemnations of the papal version of the Petrine succession. Many such scholars have found their papalism confirmed—or their anti-papalism or even their indifference—because what you get out of the Fathers on this topic is very much what you took in in the first place. Of course, the Fathers as the interpreters of Scripture in the first instance, as the setters of the style of such interpretations, have and deserve special authority. But they can be disagreed with. No theologian has ever talked more rubbish than Origen did, though few have had more fruitful insights in some things. If we feel comfortable with Origen's failings because he was never a canonised Father what are we to make of St Cyprian, whose view on baptism would erode the whole of the Church's sacramental teaching if it had not been early and decisively rejected? On some things such as Christology and the theology of the sacraments the

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Fathers offer decisive teaching: of course we need a Christology for different generations but it will, however it differs from the classical ones, still hover round the same themes, making the same rejections and reformulating the same arguments. I do not think that this is true of the theology of the Church and in particular the problem of the nature of the succession to Peter.

The age of the Fathers is the age of the Roman Empire as a going concern. The Fathers were Roman citizens for the most part and educated in *Romanitas,* either its Greek or Latin forms. It accepted the notion that *imperium* was Roman and bounded the frontiers of civilisation, setting the limits beyond which existed the *barbaroi.* It accepted the nature and form of Roman education, the value of rhetoric and legal studies. However a Jerome might fulminate about the danger to faith of Latin literature—and his fulminations never stopped him teaching it to his pupils—the climate was created in which so improbable a writer as Vergil could be Christianised and his description of Dido purloined for some verses for the Virgin Mary in the liturgy. It accepted the supreme importance of Rome and Roman traditions. Of course Christian Roman traditions—the city was now the threshold of the apostles and the scene of the martyrdom of two of them as well as of innumerable other martyrs—but in the transition a good deal of simple paganism got through. Inevitably as the Church grew Catholicity would appear as Roman and the head of the church of Rome—in the municipal sense—was seen as the heir of Peter. The Fathers' notions of Catholicity were those of men whose political and social thinking were absolutely conditioned by the Roman education they had received and which was designed to provide just that kind of conditioning. As a consequence the bishop's office as it developed acquired some of its functions, notably its juridical ones, some of the bishop's official clothing, his *cathedra* and the *basilica* he kept it in, all from Roman traditions. As the episcopal office and the episcopal structure of the Church developed a Christianised version of the Platonic notion of order produced the vision of hierarchy, with God pouring down grace and knowledge on to the bishop-philosophers, for them to pass on downwards (*v.* R. Markus, *Papacy and Hierarchy*).

Now some writers wish to justify this, and especially the role it accords to Peter and his successors, the popes, by appeal to tradition, which is all right if one appeals to tradition through the proper channels. The notion of tradition that Père Benoît (*Jesus and the Gospel,* vol. ii) seems to hold would make it a sort of unwritten Scripture and subject to the same kind of exegesis. The difficulty with this approach, which Cullmann has seen but Benoît has not, is that exegesis on the text of the NT is bad enough, since hardly any two scholars agree on the status and order of the text they are commenting on, but exegesis of a 'text' no one has seen but merely posits is impossible. The traditional Catholic answer is, of course, that the *magisterium* is there to do the including and excluding—it was, I think, Pius IX who said 'I am Tradition'. This only pushes the problem back a stage. How

does the magisterium decide? In the case under discussion by simply making the assumptions and cultural leaps I have described. So long as no one questions the process it can be appealed to as Tradition. But just as even the text of the NT itself is not immune from critical scrutiny, so certainly a tradition of this kind cannot claim immunity either. But appeal to tradition cannot be made in an exegetical manner because there are no texts claiming that kind of authority to work at. It seems to me that a critical examination of tradition on this point can only proceed by the way of speculative theology. The point we need to examine is, of course, the nature of Catholicity, when we have decided what we mean by this, how our ideas relate to Scripture, then I think we can talk about Tradition. We have appealed to the proper authority by the right channels but let us be clear that the appeal and its answer spring out of our need to know and has only the strength of the reasons we adduce.

Historically I have suggested the primitive notions of Catholicity and the comparatively early development of the idea that Peter, Rome and its bishops had a scriptural connexion, were largely conditioned by the historical and social environment in which traditions about these things flourished. It was not until the reformation and the work of Calvin that this, at first, unreflecting, notion of Tradition got the theological criticism it certainly needed.

We are becoming familiar with the claim that Calvinism is important in connexion with the rise of capitalism and the creation of bourgeois culture and a bourgeois ethics. That there is a connexion between Protestantism in general and Calvinism in particular and the rise of capitalism seems to be so, provided we follow Max Weber and think in terms of an 'elective affinity' between all these rather than, as Tawney did, in terms of crude notions of causation. But Calvinism and Calvinists involve more than this. A Calvinist theology and a Calvinist method of church organisation can be found in places and times Marx would have dismissed as feudal: after all some of the Prussian Junkers came from impeccably Calvinist backgrounds. More importantly Calvin was not simply acting as a vehicle for the *Zeitgeist* when he wrote his *Institutes,* in form a very medieval and scholastic work, but as an honest, and very original, theologian, who had grasped as Luther did not, the importance of founding the reform of the Church on a proper notion of Catholicity. It also seems clear to me that whilst Calvin consulted Tradition through the proper channels he came up with the wrong answer, and no amount of Marxian style exegesis can obscure the importance of following out the actual arguments Calvin used or the conclusions he came to.

One of the virtues of Calvinism is that it freed the idea of Catholicity and willy nilly the succession of Peter from dependence on the natural assumptions of the later Roman Empire. Calvinism eliminated the problem of succession here because his kind of Church did not have a priesthood of the kind that is transmitted across the generations. All believers are a priesthood: the fact of generating people is

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enough to solve the problem of transmitting the priesthood. A man does not have to stand in a particular place, at a particular time, where God's grace is adventitiously offered by a qualified purveyor of Grace in a magical ceremony, to receive the priesthood. He needs to be born and survive. But, of course, the restrictions have to come, or the Church would dissolve into a welter of American Bible belt sects. A man needs to be born and survive and be recognised as an elect of God. God has predestined his elect, he has done the choosing before all time. The earthly community of the elect have only to recognise each other, not to choose each other. Once recognised one has pretty well a one hundred per cent guarantee of salvation, just as the unrecognised are guaranteed one hundred per cent certain damnation. The Devil can try and sometimes succeed in introducing his men into the community of the saved itself. You check this by having stringent conditions of admission: it may be recalled how the good man in *Pilgrim's Progress* was rejected because he had not entered by the gate of justification by faith. Historians, I am told by my colleagues who know more about Calvinism than most, have neglected the extreme importance of the tests of admission when studying Calvinism. They have not, on the other hand, neglected to study the habits and reasons for excommunication and expulsion of those recognised as false elect, real servants of Belial and Beelzebub. But to persevere within the community without adhesion to overtly heretical opinions or overtly schismatic behaviour was normally a sufficient guarantee of election and grace. Hence the Westminster divines' assurance to Oliver Cromwell that his salvation could not be in doubt.

In this kind of Catholicism (because in contrast to the Lutheran brand of reform, that is what it is) there could be no Petrine problem at all, except to answer in what sense Simon bar Jonah was a rock and why the new chosen people needed an Abraham. Instead there is the normative age, the age of the Apostles, the generation of the disciples of Jesus Christ, and its record the New Testament. (In spite of the fondness Calvinist divines had for the OT, had they been critical and consistent here they would have taken a Marcionite view of the OT, whose authority, apart from the passages quoted by Jesus, they could not really vindicate.) Now Calvin's version of the Church is very NT. However repugnant some of the points I enumerated above might be to anyone brought up outside the Calvinist tradition they can all be justified by direct, unforced, quotations from the NT. Catholics sometimes forget that it was St Paul, not Calvin, who invented election and predestination. What is more the glimpses we get of the primitive Church in the NT writings do seem rather Calvinist. James's Jerusalem does not sound all that far from Calvin's Geneva. But it seems to me that the strength of the more traditional, less coherent, version of Catholicism, pope and all, is that it does *not* sound very like the age of the Apostles.

The apostolic age is unique. For one generation Christians could ask Peter or John what happened at the Last Supper, and so on. It is

noteworthy that it took eleven centuries for what seems to us the natural papal title, vicar of Christ, to appear. Before that the uniqueness, the apartness of the apostolic age was stressed in the common papal title of successor of Peter. The Calvinists get their consistency and eliminate untidy, sinful, historical things like a special priesthood and a papacy full of only too fallible popes by claiming to reproduce the apostolic Church in a totally different situation, and to be able to freeze that situation sufficiently to make the main outlines of their Catholicity always relevant. It is this I find incredible. What is more Calvinism cannot sufficiently allow for the power of the Devil as prince of this world. They admit that the Devil can infiltrate, but the process of entry control and deportation are sufficient guarantee that he will not remain. This is like believing that it is safe to leave the just separation of the deserving from the undeserving poor to the officials of the ministry of social security.

We all have a tendency to take this kind of line. The devil cannot touch us because we are tucked in the cot of salvation. Popes and cardinals, especially cardinals, as we well know, tend to make approval of themselves into the touchstone of Catholic orthodoxy. We all know what enormities have been demanded in the name of loyalty to the hierarchy, but Catholic tradition ensures this never lasts. No one, not even the pope, has an automatic ticket to Heaven and equally it is presumptuous of any Catholic to claim with certainty that anyone is in Hell. It is traditional Catholicity that separates the priestly actions of a priest from his human actions: thus when a bad, but qualified man, performs the proper ritual actions God's grace is transmitted, however unworthy the agent. (Graham Greene's whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* is more Calvinist than Catholic because in the end he acts as an elect vessel of grace with more than human resources.) Priestly action is distinct and separate from the frailities of the agent. Popes may be indubitably popes but they may still go to Hell and Catholic traditions have suggested many have already gone there. It is very difficult for a Calvinist to admit that a man in good standing in the community may fatally err, because such men preach the Word not from orders transmitted by apostolic succession doled out by mere men, but from God's prior election and then merit recognised by the community. Without original sin, I think, the Church might well be like a collection of Calvinist communities, perhaps the kingdom of God might be rather like this anyway, but here and now, with people organised as they are, I do not believe it. If, however, the Church is not a simple extension of the apostolic age then the leadership of the new chosen people and the succession to Peter are real problems.

This time the problems are posed by the Orthodox—and to a lesser degree the Anglicans whose theological tradition seems a curious mixture of Orthodoxy and Calvinism—and are again best dealt with by looking at theological implications. These traditions accept differentiations of status and function within the Church and are patient of

an inherited priestly office exercised by men who may or may not be worthy. A special kind of priesthood, the episcopate, is posited, specially concerned with the transmission of orders correctly from one generation to another. It is not denied that the bishop of Rome is the successor of Peter. But it is usual in this tradition to take the Scriptural texts relating to Peter, the conferring of the power to bind and loose, the command to feed my sheep, etc., as addressed to Peter, not in person but as representative of all the apostles. Thus the successors of Peter inherit a primacy of honour and status but not of power or jurisdiction. There are Scriptural difficulties here because plainly in Mt. 16 only Peter and no other disciple, is the rock, and it seems to follow that only Peter is given the power of the keys conveying, the imagery would suggest, a vicegerency on Jesus's behalf. But the problems raised by Orthodox and Anglicans cannot be solved by biblical exegesis either.

These traditions provide for the transmission of sacramental grace from generation to generation in a perfectly Catholic fashion but problems arise from the setting out of the Christian message anew from time to time. They meet this difficulty up to a point by recognising the general councils of the undivided Church. Against this the papist view is that the kind of activity represented by these councils is an on-going activity that cannot have been necessary for eight hundred years only to have the necessity disappear without any reason. Of course these councils definitively settled a set of theological problems of peculiar importance: the definition of the natures of Christ. But they also dealt with the problems of the propriety of sacred images in Christian worship and the theology behind the veneration of images. Surely problems about the nature of the eucharist raised by the development of philosophical method are equally demanding, equally important as those raised by the iconoclastic controversy. Again it is easy to think that dogmas relating to Mary were defined in the teeth of the scientists and other unbelieving dogs, especially in view of the polemics of some of their defenders, but in fact they are problems that go back to the great Christological dogmas. The council of Ephesus is of undisputed canonical status but its definition of Mary as mother of God set in train the kind of issue that had to be resolved sometime by an equal authority. To take the division of the Church into Greek and Latin sections as a stage in the history of the teaching office of the Church so important as virtually to remove the power of authoritative decision from that teaching office, is a difficult choice to defend. It is a definition by decision but that decision is taken on purely ecclesiological grounds by the Orthodox and Anglicans, the papists went on settling matters as they arose for the simple reason that the kind of matters that arose were of precisely the same kind that had been settled by authority at some point since the early days of the Church.

Papists do not have the same kind of problems of authority these other traditions do. Everyone in the basic traditional Catholicism has to allow that problems are not all solved by consulting the NT but that

theology is an integral part of the solutions. Here the papist tradition is nearer the Calvinists, precisely because the two traditions share a common concern with Catholicity, and a common feeling for the decisive importance of the apostolic age. When theological problems arise there must be a search for the Catholic, the universal answer, and that is dealt with by a referral to the Scriptures, but authority here and now has the onus of finding the true tradition here and now. Every age is equidistant from the apostolic age as well as eternity and the basic problems of theology and the need for authority is the same every generation and suffered no sea change in 1054 or any other date.

It does seem to me then that the papist notion of the Petrine succession and the necessity of a place for papalism in a proper notion of Catholicity can be defended but not as a piece of Scriptural exegesis —Mat. 16 in a sense created the problem, not offering any solutions. Papalism is a theological doctrine created by reflexion on experience in the light of the teaching of Scripture. But how do we recognise the papacy as the successors to Peter; on what is this claim based?

We do so precisely because of Rome. Rome is the link between Peter and the popes. Now it seems extremely improbable that Peter founded the Roman Church in any sense whatever and no one knows, because there are not even any traditions about it, what arrangements, if any, he made for its rule before he died. If Cullmann's reconstruction of the reasons for that martyrdom are correct it is likely enough Peter was in no position to lay down anything. It was up to surviving Christians in Rome to gather themselves together and carry on as best they could. I have suggested that it was because Peter was martyred in Rome and because of Rome's peculiar social and ideological status that when men looked for Peter's successor they looked to the head of the Roman Church. Peter was the Abraham of a new chosen people, but from the start, and especially after the fall of Jerusalem, it must have been apparent that the new chosen people would differ in important ways from the old. The old chosen people had a holy land, a compact territory with Jerusalem as its religious and cult centre. The new chosen people, thanks to the missionary efforts of Paul above all, could never claim a holy land but must always be dispersed amongst other peoples. Consequently the successors of Peter, the new Abraham, could not be left to the chances of the political vicissitudes of that holy land. The new people had not the underpinning of a physical Israel to clarify the issue of the succession to the new Abraham. It is very difficult to see what other solution was open to the Christians of the Roman Empire other than to grasp at the collocation of the death of Peter and the emergence of the Roman Church, and to see Rome and its religious heads as the source for the new succession of teachers and prophets, when such were required. Does this means that the papacy is forever tied to Rome?

Père Benoît thinks not. It seems to me that the effect of his argument is the opposite of what he intended, to confirm belief in the tradi-

tional association of pope and Rome. Again an unreflecting tradition is tested by theological scrutiny and comes in rather stronger form.

He writes: 'By its very nature Christianity does not have a hierarchical centre attached by divine right to a particular city' (*op. cit.*, p. 127). This is partly because he wants to detach the papacy from the episcopate and the rest of the hierarchy. I do not believe that a papacy over, above, and outside the Church will work and I believe it comes from that Roman legal tradition of equating the Church with a Roman corporation governed by a *princeps,* i.e., the Pope. He goes on to say: '. . . this historical role of the Roman church is not a decisive criterion of the primacy in the eyes of Catholics' (*op. cit.*, p. 167). How then do we recognise the successor of Peter? There are all sorts of ways it could be done, and most of them have been tried. Councils to adjudicate, a body in some ways representative of the hierarchy at least, i.e., the college of cardinals, to elect. But what they found themselves deciding was who was bishop of Rome, the papacy then takes care of itself. Of course it is adventitious that Rome should be the place the Petrine succession was attached to. But the point is surely that just because the new chosen people cannot have a Jerusalem, as there are certainly going to be contests for the succession, new divisions producing a new Judah, a new Israel, new Sadducees and so on, it is an enormous advantage to be able to say the new Abraham happened to die in Rome and it is the head of the Roman church, in despite of anybody better, who should be deemed his successor. It is the very adventitiousness of the Roman-Petrine connexion that makes it so suitable to serve the *utilitas* of the Church, contingency, general recognition, habit—in theology as elsewhere men are very habit-forming creatures—and above all the inability to produce any other criterion which would have a hope of gaining general acceptance.

It may be asked must the successor to Peter always be bishop of Rome? In the past the length of the connexion would have been unhesitatingly pointed to as decisive. But we no longer exclude women from the pulpit because Paul said we should. We suppose he spoke for a period when women had not access to the kind of education necessary to produce preachers, now they have. More delicately: is the Roman connexion like the problem of the ordination of women? The ordination of women is obviously an open question now and will presumably be solved one way or the other in the not too distant future. Leaving aside those mythical medieval abbesses we read about these days who celebrated the eucharist, the question runs: is the exclusion of women from the priesthood in the primitive Church normative or not? Is it like Paul's prohibition relative to the status of women in earlier ages. I do not myself believe it is. It seems to me likely to be related to the deep psychological differences between men and women that Freud for instance pointed out. (The lofty condemnations of Freud on such points by the combined forces of Women's and Gay Lib would carry more conviction if they read what he said and studied his reasons before rushing to join the adherents of Professors

Skinner and Eysenck.) But the Church might well decide otherwise and I should then suppose myself mistaken. I do not see however that this could happen in the case of the Roman-Petrine connexion. It may be pointed out that when the papacy did in practice break that connexion and reside at Avignon for some generations they carefully maintained their theoretical positions as bishops of Rome and never made Avignon into an episcopal see, let alone allowed their sojourn to influence their traditional titles. It was precisely the difficulty of relocating the papacy at Rome in practice and the problem of deciding who, after so long an absence, was really bishop of Rome, that made the schisms of the so called conciliar epoch so difficult to settle and let them last so long. Precisely because there are no deep Scriptural, psychological, or economic reasons, why the succession to Peter should be tied to Rome or any other place, habit and convenience must surely be decisive. If we tried to break that habit I think we should find ourselves hopelessly divided, often with excellent reasons on every side, so that until we agreed out of sheer inconvenience to go back to the Roman habit we should have no agreement at all. Scholars have tried too hard to give the papacy too impeccable title deeds to its position. Convenience and habit may not be very dignifying reasons—and perhaps not the worse for that, the popes of late have really got quite above their station in life—but they are, given human nature, very powerful and potent ones.

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