Papalism Ancient and Modern (I)

by Eric John

It must be obvious that no theme of traditional theology requires a new airing in the atmosphere of *aggiornamento* more than that of the papacy and its place in the Church. Ultimately this is a task for the professional theologian but one who could, in Karl Barth's words '. . . take history seriously as a force outside himself and which spoke to him with authority'. For this to be so, the historian, through whom history speaks if it speaks at all, must do some spade work. It is natural for theologians to suppose that since the *data* of their study are eternal verities or eternal falsehoods, then the theses they present are absolutely, once and for all, true or false. But it is becoming increasingly obvious that however absolute the central concerns of theologians are, there are very important areas of their study in which a radical relativism is called for.

Let us take for example the theology of the eucharist. In an important sense, it is the study of the relationship between bread and wine, disposed within a certain ritual, and the flesh and blood of Christ. What could be more direct and simple, more suitable for questions answerable with a flat yes or no than this study? But these questions must be asked in terms of human language, that is they must be made intelligible in a human activity peculiarly prone to changes of meaning and peculiarly liable to quite remarkable expansion. For centuries it seemed that questions about the eucharist could only be asked in the language of Aristotle's metaphysics. What seems to be clear now is that they no longer can—quite. The language of philosophy has been so transformed within the last generation that this alone requires a revaluation of traditional eucharistic attitudes and a re-formulation of eucharistic thinking. There is yet another dimension of the relativist study of such doctrines as those besetting the eucharist, which opens up once one accepts the absolute necessity of some measure of relativity and impermanence in the various possible questions and answers. This is simply that once one accepts that theological propositions are about things eternally true or false but expressible only in language infected with decay and change, then the way is open for a study of the history of these answers. That is, one studies these expressions in relation to the context in which they were uttered. Who said them, why and when, and to what end are a crude way of setting out the approach. It isn't in practice quite as simple as that. It is the job of the historian to find the relationships between utterance and the circumstances of the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1967.tb01141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

utterer that are relevant. As historical study progresses, we ought to get better at detecting relevance. For instance, greater knowledge of psychology makes the increasing post-Tridentine emphasis on the destruction of the bread and wine in the eucharist a matter for comment and an occasion for hesitation about what formerly seemed a way of talking that hardly called for analysis. More recently historians are groping their way to make a proper use of the sociologists' categories of status and class and the way in which assumptions about these can affect seemingly wholly unrelated matters of ritual and doctrine.

I deliberately took the eucharist because if ever there was an absolutely given matter for theological study it was this. If we turn to the theories of papalism the problems of the relativism of the subject are very much worse.

If Catholic teaching is true, then the papacy is of the *esse* of the Church in precisely the same way as the eucharist. But it is obvious that the evidence for the papacy always being *there* is not as clear as it is in the case of the eucharist. Of course theologians have faced this difficulty and they have examined the scarce and conflicting evidence for the nature of the papacy in the early Church with great skill and erudition. They have more or less plausibly papered over the cracks. That is, they have shown that much can be explained by the need for Catholics to develop from experience the implications of the Petrine texts. This would be alright, and I am sure it basically is alright, except that nearly all the textbooks on the subject then slide over from saying that even in the first century there was a pope to assuming without further argument that the sort of papal authority shown in documents like the *Syllabus of Errors* or *Humani Generis* is also implicit in the epistle of Clement. The result is confusion of the doctrine of development with a set of intellectual conjuring tricks: the sort of thing that makes the kind of criticisms levelled at such doctrines by Charles Davis, for instance, not easy to answer within the terms usually set.

Let me take a single example, once a famous one, to show the kind of inadequacy I am trying to point to. Pope Honorius I was involved less than fortunately in the Christological heresies rending the Byzantine empire of his day. He was solicited by the patriarch of Constantinople for approval of doctrines which were later said quite correctly to be heretical deviations from the orthodox positions defined at Chalcedon. Honorius was to some extent deceived by the patriarch, but he had, inadvertently or not, lent his authority to a new and heretical Christology for which he was declared a heretic by a council, in 680, and by Leo II. When this case was brought up at Vatican I the answer was made that Honorius was expressing a private opinion and no-one claimed that a pope's private opinions were infallible. The case of Pope Honorius was classed with that of John XXII, who taught, explicitly as a private opinion, on an as yet

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1967.tb01141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

undefined dogma, a thesis concerning the Beatific Vision that was quickly rejected. Clearly in the case of John XXII no problem exists: equally clearly the case of Pope Honorius is no parallel. Honorius was not speaking as a private theologian. He had no reputation as such and probably no expertise. He was asked as successor of Peter and bishop of Rome at the request of the chief layman of Christendom, the highest secular authority, for a decision, which he gave and in which he was gravely in error. In fact Honorius' letter is in form much more like the *tome* Leo the Great sent to the fathers gathered at Chalcedon than Pope John's sermon.

If we are to be taken seriously when we claim the pope is infallible, then obviously we must be aware that this infallibility has limitations. Anyone would agree that private papal opinions are not necessarily infallible, and no-one would expect that popes could always avoid getting some things wrong in the odd sermon or letter. But the case of Honorius shows we must go much further than this. As Vatican I put it, the pope is infallible on certain specific topics when he speaks *ex cathedra*. We must not explain away Pope Honorius and forget about him. We must realize that we have imposed a limitation on the notion of infallibility which must exclude even so serious a letter on so important occasion as the one Honorius was ill-advised enough to despatch. Clearly Pope Honorius' letter was every bit as official and important as any modern papal encyclical. It seems to me that the logic of setting up a criterion, that *ex cathedra* pronouncements only count as infallible, creates an absolute, unbridgeable gulf between pronouncements in and out of the chair. Those theologians who spend their time grading papal pronouncements in order as they approach infallibility are confusing themselves and us. At some point an absolute distinction is made that henceforth creates a gulf between the pronouncement in question and every other pronouncement, quite different in kind from that separating the least from the most probable opinion ever set out by a pope.

What I think we have been doing is using the qualification in the Vatican decree in a maximal sense to dispose of awkward cases and in a minimal sense when it comes to assessing the authority of the pronouncements of recent popes. What we must do is have one meaning for these two simple Latin words that can sort out all past papal pronouncements and which will enable us to test new ones as they are made. This is of course in the end a matter for the theologian and, as in the case of the eucharist, no one will ever find words to express what is meant by *ex cathedra* which will last for ever. That seems to me not to matter; but what does matter is that we should find the right words for *now*. I think we can only do this if we treat papal pronouncements like a game of which we are spectators and yet know the rules only roughly. We have to infer them from the course of the play to which we have some clues but no rule-book. This is the part the historian is needed for: it is a part for which the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1967.tb01141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

way papal history as done by most English-speaking historians at present is no help at all.

Papal history in English is done on triumphalist presuppositions. That is it is done by men who assume the part of counsel for the defence of papal authority at its most extreme —the fact that many of them absolutely reject the papal claims for themselves does not make much difference. What happens is that Catholic and non-Catholic scholars alike take for granted that where papal authority has reigned in the past, it has always been interpreted as triumphalist papalism would have it. If a pope is found involved in some matter, then this is papal authority in action if it turned out well. If a pope made a mess of something, we look round for a scapegoat who misled him. If Gregory the Great initiated a mission to convert the English, what a splendid example of papalism in action! What a suitable topic for inclusion in a thesis on the debt of the West to the papacy. It seems to me to be highly relevant to mention that this is almost the only example of a missionary enterprise undertaken by a pope in history. Missions were normally left to private enterprise. In this case we have a true *exceptio quae probat regulam*. Gregory wanted to come as a private individual. His quite unsought election to the papacy prevented him, so he sent some of his monks whom he knew he could trust. The fact that Gregory was pope is in the highest degree irrelevant to the conversion. It has in fact led triumphalist historians to invent a set of Bismarckian policies the Pope is supposed to have had in mind. None of these will stand up to much probing. Here we have a true saint doing a remarkable thing for his day, with very great consequences: the triumphalist is indifferent to the man's motives or the obvious part his sanctity played, he must have a pope jealous of his power and eager to extend it. What triumphalist papal history amounts to is a kind of brief for the defence amassed by a precedent-minded lawyer. A kind of highest common factor is derived from a study of papal actions completely ignoring context, character, and motive. This reduces the papacy to an inhuman, faceless, authority, as capable of attracting affection as the local county council. Acceptable for the same reason—convenience, cultural utility (the reader will no doubt have read his Christopher Dawson)—it ignores the fact that the papacy is an office that must be exercised, well or badly, by a man, a role that every person that fills it must touch with his personal style. What is worse is that like lawyers' briefs it may be alright for getting the man off but it hasn't very much to do with finding out the truth.

The truth, it seems to me, is that the papacy has never played anything like the role in the Church the triumphalist papalists suppose, that its authority has been deployed in ways they have never noticed and that their mistakes are doing a great deal to prevent papal authority being taken in the modern Church in the way it ought to be taken. (*To be continued next month*)

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1967.tb01141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press