

Vatican I and the Papacy

8: Recent Catholic Approaches

Peter in the New Testament edited by Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried and John Reumann. Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1974.

Papal Primacy and the Universal Church edited by Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy. Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1974.

Papsttum Als Oekumenische Frage edited by the University Ecumenical Institutes Working Party. Kaiser, Munich and Grünewald, Mainz, 1979.

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To chronicle the important work on the papacy that has appeared in the last ten years would tax the competence even of a professional ecumenist. But it seems worth drawing attention to two main areas of research in which the standard Catholic-apologetical line has clearly undergone an irreversible shift.

None of this work has received wide circulation or even much notice in England, where the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission's Agreed Statement on "Authority in the Church" (Venice 1976) remains lying on the table, little discussed at any rate among Catholics and certainly not yet on the way to being "received" by people or clergy as a fair account of what we believe. The reasons for reluctance to go further with the Venice Statement are not hard to see. The explosive impact of the new pope promises (or threatens) an era of such strongly centralist leadership that talk of collegiality and pluralism such as the document goes in for, and such as any ecumenism must involve, is becoming happily (or depressingly) irrelevant. Then again, whether it need or should have done so or not, the ordination of women priests in some churches of the Anglican Communion places a question mark against the practical outcome which the Venice Statement might, or might not, contain. Rightly or wrongly, many Catholics wonder what an agreement on the function of authority

in the Church means in practice (the real test) if it might exclude from submitting to the prior judgement of a general council (say) what appears to them to be such a radical departure from tradition.

Nor (it must be admitted) are such Catholics in their questioning much enlightened by some of what they read in *Elucidations*, the first instalment of the ARCIC response to queries and criticisms. We are told, for example, that the fact of there being Anglican women priests has no bearing on the Canterbury Statement on "Ministry and Ordination", because (page 16) "it was concerned with the origin and nature of the ordained ministry and not with the question who can or cannot be ordained". As they go on to say: "Objections, however substantial, to the ordination of women are of a different kind from objections raised in the past against the validity of Anglican Orders in general". They then go on to call for reappraisal of the condemnation of Anglican Orders by Pope Leo XIII in 1896. The two points which they make are of course perfectly correct: their terms of reference did not include the question who can or cannot be ordained, and the objections against the validity of ordaining women are not the same at all as traditional objections to recognising Anglican Orders. But this response will nevertheless seem remarkably like academic by-play to many Catholic readers, and tend only to discredit the work of ARCIC as a whole (which would be unfair and unfortunate, since it already has substantial prejudice and suspicion to meet). People are bound to wonder what it would mean to recognise Anglican Orders *in general* while also recognising the plain fact that *some* human beings whom the Catholic and Orthodox Churches regard by divine revelation as physically incapable of receiving the sacrament at all have been admitted to Anglican Orders. To the ordinary eye, in fact, the three ARCIC agreements on eucharist, priesthood and authority must all look outflanked by this issue.

The Venice Statement is, however, only part of a much wider and deeper movement of theological exploration and convergence on the role of the papacy, as recent publications testify. The German volume contains the texts of the papers and transcriptions of the debates at a conference of Catholic and Protestant scholars. The American books are the product of the official conversations that have been going on between Catholics and Lutherans in the United States since 1965. These are by far the most important ecumenical discussions in which Catholics have ever been involved, and the results constitute as essential a *locus theologicus* for Catholic ecclesiology as the *Tomas Agapis* (the collection of letters exchanged between Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch).

Part of the unfinished business listed by the Venice Statement was the question of the status of the "Petrine texts" in the justi-

fiction of the papal claims (Matt 16:18 ff, Luke 22:31 ff, John 21:15 ff). We were informed that “many Roman Catholic scholars do not now find it necessary to stand by former exegesis of these texts in every respect”. This is clearly corroborated by the Catholic contributions in both the German symposium and the American book. To put it somewhat paradoxically, the less the texts seem to support the traditional Catholic-apologetical idea of St Peter as the first pope, the more clearly they attest the dominance of the figure of Peter in various parts of the Church towards the close of the first century. This is the first of our two areas of reflection on the papacy where an irreversible shift is taking place in Catholic thinking.

The Vatican Council in 1870 spent very little time on the first chapter of the dogmatic constitution “Pastor Aeternus”. No one had any difficulty in accepting that “the primacy of jurisdiction over the universal Church of God was immediately and directly promised and given to Blessed Peter the Apostle by Christ the Lord”. The evidence for this is cited: John 1:42, Matt 16:16 ff, and John 21:15 ff. No doubt it was being taken for granted that these three texts are straightforward reports of three dateable scenes which occurred literally as described in the years 29/30. What happened then was that Simon was “appointed the Prince of the Apostles and the visible head of the whole Church militant”. This was affirmed specifically against the *pravae sententiae* of those (such no doubt as the Reformers) who would deny that Peter on his own, independently of the other apostles, received “true and proper primacy of jurisdiction”, and against those (Catholic followers of Edmond Richer and suchlike) who would interpret the New Testament evidence as saying that Peter received his authority through the mediation of the Church and not immediately and directly from Christ, and who would thus deny that he received “primacy of true and proper jurisdiction”.

It is not easy to take up a straightforward position as regards these assertions. No one would want to say today that the New Testament texts cited show anything other than that Simon Peter received his role immediately and directly from Jesus. But it seems hopelessly inadequate to say that these texts show that he received anything so precise, or so jejune, as primacy of *jurisdiction* over the universal Church of God. This is being asserted of course against those who would see it as primacy of *honour* only. But what more recent exegetical approaches have demonstrated indisputably is that neither honour nor jurisdiction renders or even properly focusses the multiple and variegated image of Peter to which the New Testament bears witness. In claiming far less for these texts the new exegesis sees in them far more.

The new exegetical approach prefers to concentrate first of all on bringing out the distinctive theological slant, and the characteristic ecclesiological perspective, of each gospel over against the others, and to see each gospel as a whole. Far from reducing the significance of the “Tu es Petrus” proof-text (the papal shibboleth) putting it back into Matthew’s gospel as a whole only enhances the figure of Simon Peter as the rock-man.

To begin with, these scholars all assume that the Gospel of Matthew as we have it was written in the eighties and that it reflects things that mattered *then*. This is the most important governing principle of all biblical criticism, first clearly brought to the fore by Wellhausen and formulated half a century ago by Bultmann as follows: “A literary work or a fragment of tradition is a primary source for the historical situation out of which it arose, and is only a secondary source for the historical details concerning which it gives information”. Prudently stated, this principle was made its own by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its famous “Instruction” issued in 1964. It marks a radical rejection of the views of Papias who said (as quoted by Eusebius) that Mark “wrote accurately, howbeit not in order, all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord”. Papias was a bishop in Asia Minor who died at a ripe old age in the year 130. His view that Mark jotted things down but in no particular order has prevented us from seeing the very clear theological structure of the Gospel of Mark, and his picture of the evangelist’s simply setting down “all that he recalled” has prevented us until recently from appreciating how *selective* Mark’s work must be. Most of us still have to make a deliberate effort to read the gospels against these presuppositions that we have inherited from Papias. His grip on exegesis through his formulation of the presuppositions with which we start to read has been extraordinarily powerful and lasting – particularly for a man who, according to Eusebius as he quotes him, “evidently was of exceedingly small intelligence, as one might say judging from his discourses; nevertheless it was owing to him that so very many churchmen after him adopted a like opinion, taking their stand on the fact that he was a man of primitive times” (H. E. III, 39).

The thesis of an epoch-making book by W. D. Davies (*The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, 1964) is becoming generally accepted. This is to the effect that Matthew’s gospel is “the Christian answer to the Judaism emerging at Jamnia”. When the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 the followers of Jesus fled one way while the Pharisee, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, led the reconstruction of the Jewish faith at a place called Jamnia (Yavneh). This was virtually the creation of the rabbinical Judaism with which we are familiar today. Although the Pharisees

of the year 30 were clearly angered by what seemed to them the heresies that Jesus taught, it was at a meeting of the supreme council in Jerusalem that he was condemned and the Pharisees did not have the decisive voice. Fifty years later the Pharisees dominated the stage as the only survivors of the variegated Judaism which Jesus had known, apart from his own followers. Matthew presents the Pharisees with unparalleled virulence and is alone in quoting Jesus as saying "You are not to be called rabbi" (23:8). His animus against the Pharisees is often traced to his being himself a convert (perhaps the scribe alluded to at 13:52), or else to his being a former tax collector (cf 9:9), a social group allegedly treated with special contempt by Pharisees. It is a decision to be taken on non-scriptural grounds; but it surely makes better sense to think of Matthew's text as marked by the ecclesiological situation to which he was responding rather than merely by his own personal psychology.

Such an approach at any rate makes sense of why Matthew's distinctive emphasis should be so strongly upon Jesus as "teacher". His final scene is obviously intended to recapitulate his version of the Gospel and to open out upon the future history of the Church as he sees it. It is very striking, then, that the resurrected Jesus comes to the apostolic group on the mountain to send them forth with the mandate to make disciples of all nations, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . . until the close of the age". Writing somewhere in Palestine or perhaps in Syria, probably in the last decades of the first century, Matthew found it impossible to shape his vision of the Christian movement without highlighting the role of Simon Peter.

Simon Peter is the first disciple to be called (4:18); Jesus visits his home (8:14); he is the first of the twelve apostles (10:2); but it is in the chapters that concentrate on instruction about life in the Christian community that the importance of Simon Peter becomes evident. These chapters stretch from the reference to "their synagogue" (18:54) to the picture of the assembled Christian community as "the church" (18:17): a stretch of text which seems to mirror the increasing distance historically between the two groups, and to mime the opening of the space for the Church. These chapters contain four scenes in which Simon Peter has a leading role.

In Mark's account of the Transfiguration we are told that when he made his little speech ("I will make three booths") Simon Peter "did not know what to say" (Mark 9:6). The impression is created that he had made a fool of himself. Matthew does not have this verse at all. But the most interesting difference between Matthew and Mark is in the account of the walking on the water. For Mark, once their terror of the "ghost" had been overcome and

Jesus joined them in the boat, the disciples were no more than “utterly astounded” – failing, that is to say, to identify Jesus as Yahweh for them, “for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:52). But for Matthew, when Jesus gets into the boat, the disciples worship him and say, “Truly you are the Son of God”. This collective acknowledgment of his identity is preceded by the story of how, to test his identity, Simon Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water” (14:28). Peter is called to the Lord across the water but sees the wind, becomes afraid and begins to sink. Jesus comes to the rescue, chiding him for being a “man of little faith”. The lesson for Matthew’s audience here is surely (among much else) that when he begins to sink Peter will be saved by Jesus. The “man of little faith” is, however, also the rock upon which Christ’s Church is built.

In the third scene, with a parallel again in Mark, the difference is once again that Matthew incorporates a substantial exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus – in fact the verses greeting him as blessed recipient of a divine revelation, creating him the rock, and promising him the keys of the kingdom of heaven (16:17-19). Almost at once Peter refuses to listen to Jesus as he outlines the destiny of the suffering Messiah and is dismissed as Satan: “You are a hindrance to me, for you are not on the side of God but of men”. The rock so easily becomes a stumbling block.

Finally, it is Peter who asks Jesus to explain the parable about defying Jewish purity laws (15:15); it is Peter again who asks Jesus how often Christians are to forgive one another (18:21); and it is to Peter that the problem is brought as to whether Christians should pay the Temple tax (17:24). These are all problems related to defining the Christian community. The bounds of the Church are being drawn and Peter clearly plays a decisive role. The coin that will be found in the first fish’s mouth is to pay the tax for Jesus and for Peter: “Give it to them for me and for yourself”.

To compose all these elements into a coherent picture of Matthew’s understanding of the role of Simon Peter in the self-definition of the Church would not be easy, and impossible in this space. But one may say, summarising and stressing the main point here, that, whatever all these details may tell us about what Simon Peter was doing in the year 30 or thereabouts, it was impossible to address the needs of a Christian community in the year 80 or thereabouts, some fifteen years after his death and a very long way from Rome, without highlighting the dominance of Simon Peter in the process of circumscribing ecclesial bounds.

About the same time, or probably some years later, the Fourth Gospel was taking final shape in another Christian community,

just as remote from Rome and probably in total ignorance of Matthew's work and congregation. A somewhat different picture of Simon Peter emerges: he is not the first disciple to be called (1:41); he has to approach Jesus through the mediation of the Beloved Disciple (13:24, 18:16, 21:7), and is slower than he is to understand the significance of the empty tomb (20:8). The "hero" of the Johannine tradition is clearly not Simon Peter but the Beloved Disciple. But less close to Jesus as he is in some ways Simon Peter nevertheless seems to occupy a much more secure place in the scheme of things. The text finally leaves the impression that it is the authority of the Beloved Disciple and his particular role (as bearing witness in a gospel and as living so long) that have to be fitted into a picture of the early Church in which the figure of Simon Peter as chief shepherd is the unchallengeable point of departure.

Turning then to the Second Epistle attributed to St Peter, and dating it as the latest work in the canon, perhaps as late as the year 130, we find a remarkable picture of "Simeon Peter" (*sic*) condemning erroneous doctrine and even issuing a familiarly "papal" *monitum* about the writings of "our beloved brother Paul": "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures".

In terms of Vatican I, then, we find that, by the standards of recent exegesis, the *institution* of the apostolic primacy in St Peter can easily be discerned (chapter 1 of "Pastor Aeternus"), while its *perpetuity* (chapter 2), in the sense at any rate of continuing appeal to the figure and the authority of Simon Peter, may be equally easily traced in the latest documents of the New Testament. Assuming the late dating of the texts we have mentioned it becomes possible to chart a development within the New Testament itself, from the figure of Simon Peter reflected in Paul's early letters to the symbol of Peter as fisherman-shepherd-martyr-teacher variously mirrored in Matthew, John and (say) 2 Peter. This is not to say that any particular bishop, of Rome or anywhere else, had taken on the mantle of Peter within the New Testament period. The figure and the authority of St Paul goes through a comparable development in the New Testament – and the highly influential writings of Luke (influential especially in the evolution of church order) conclude with a picture of Paul in Rome, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered" (Acts 28:31). But that takes us on to our second area of interest: the emergence of the successor of Peter in Rome. For it is one thing to trace the trajectory of the figure of Peter through and beyond the New Testament, and in that sense

to recognise the perpetuity and inheritability of the role; it is another matter altogether to show how the bishop of Rome emerged as the principal legate.

Few today doubt that St Peter died in Rome as a martyr somewhere between 64 and 68 A.D. Few believe, on the other hand, that he had been bishop of Rome for the legendary twenty-five years, or that he was either founder or even leader of the church in Rome. The Catholic scholars in the books under review are unanimous in abandoning the old-fashioned apologetical view according to which St Peter was followed as bishop of Rome by Linus, Cletus, Clement and so on. The lists of bishops of Rome given by Irenaeus and Eusebius cannot be relied upon because we can see from *The Shepherd of Hermas* that as late as the year 120 it was a group of "presbyters" and not a bishop in the modern sense who ruled the church at Rome. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred about the year 107, says nothing about any bishop there in his letter to the Romans, although in his other letters, addressed to churches in his native Asia, there is always some allusion to their bishops. There is nothing in the letter attributed to Clement to show that he was himself a monarchical bishop; in fact he speaks of bishops and presbyters as though they were identical. The letter (dated to 96 A.D.) shows that the Christian community in Rome felt able to chide the community in Corinth, but Dionysius of Corinth could send out letters of a similar kind some seventy years later. There is nothing in I Clement to indicate even the germination of a primacy based upon Petrine succession.

James F. McCue, in the American volume, doubts if we can safely assume that any one was bishop of Rome in the modern sense until Anicetus, in about the year 154. Both McCue and Wilhelm de Vries in the German symposium doubt if the intervention in the paschal controversy by Victor, towards the close of the second century, indicates anything like a primacy of jurisdiction. In fact after examining the claims of Callistus and Cornelius, de Vries concludes that it is only with Pope Stephen, in the middle of the third century, that we can properly speak of a bishop of Rome as successor of Peter. The leading figure in the presbyteral college which Clement perhaps was, the bishop of a great and venerable church which Victor certainly was, now at last gave way to a bishop who identified himself with the figure of St Peter. This was a qualitative change – in retrospect a natural enough development – but there is no use in claiming that any bishop of Rome before the middle of the third century had in fact taken on the mantle of St Peter and assumed the Petrine inheritance. But by then the process had certainly begun which would reach fulfilment in the middle of the fifth century with Pope Leo I: the great-

est of all the exponents of the Petrine primacy.

How does such a view of the history of the papacy seem in the light of the decree of Vatican I? In fact, though there can be no doubt that the unanimous view at Vatican I must have been in terms of an unbroken succession in the see of Rome from St Peter onwards, the text of the decree makes no reference to any bishops' list but unerringly, and no doubt also unwittingly, goes right to the heart of the matter:

“For none can doubt, and it is known to all ages, that the holy and Blessed Peter, the Prince and chief of the Apostles, the pillar of the faith and foundation of the Catholic Church, received the keys of the kingdom from our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Redeemer of mankind, and lives, presides, and judges to this day, in his successors the Bishops of the Holy See of Rome, which was founded by him and consecrated by his blood”.

It is not possible to accept that the church of Rome was *founded* by Simon Peter; but (as de Vries insists) it is undoubtedly upon the martyrdom at Rome of St Peter and St Paul that the special role of the Roman Church, and eventually of its bishop, rests. Being a great metropolis, and at first the capital of the empire, Rome obviously drew to itself a great deal of prestige and might in any event, for political reasons, have become the most dominant centre of Christianity in the Mediterranean, or at any rate in the west. But there can be no doubt that it was to Rome as the place where Peter and Paul were martyred, and then to the bishop of Rome (when he finally emerged) as chief custodian of the tombs of the apostles, that Christians of east and west turned, from the very earliest times. Clement bears witness to that; it may well be that Luke and John are also aware of it. Thus, to concede that St Peter never was bishop of Rome, and to admit that there was no bishop of Rome at all for the best part of a century after his death, far from discrediting the papacy completely, simply opens the way for us to recover not just the history but also the deepest significance of the Petrine primacy.

The authority-figure of St Peter extends throughout the successive phases of the composition of the New Testament writings and opens out beyond them, and gradually, over two or three centuries, the church in the city where Peter and Paul died, begins to fit into, and measure up to, the New Testament image of the Petrine role, at least in some of its many aspects. Within the New Testament itself we can see how the significance of Peter continued after his death and in fact began then to increase. It took a long time for the trajectory of the New Testament image of St Peter to be earthed, and to settle, in the leadership of the church

in Rome. But this is what it means to say, in the words of Vatican I, though of course not justifying them in the same way, that “Blessed Peter has a perpetual line of successors in the primacy of the universal Church”. When Vatican I insisted that the succession to St Peter in the bishopric of Rome is “by divine right” (*iure divino*), they were contradicting those who had argued that the papacy was a purely human invention. But this sixteenth-century polemical distinction is unacceptable. The fulfilment of the purposes of God is inseparable from the development of human history. To accept that there was a long delay before the bishop of Rome (once such an office had come into existence) assumed the mantle of St Peter, and to stop the frantic search for allusions to the existence of papal supremacy from Peter’s death onwards, is at last to recollect the space of time in which the church in Rome kept sacred the memory of the martyred apostles.

Dogma has too often been allowed to rule over history. Not until Leo the Great, in the middle of the fifth century, can we confidently discern a bishop of Rome who was not just bishop of a great church or patriarch of the west but also the mystical and sacramental embodiment of the figure of St Peter. As Wilhelm de Vries insists, “The primacy did not drop fully fledged from heaven”. What is more, and this will bear much more directly on the forthcoming theological conversations between Catholic and Orthodox theologians, it is very difficult to show that Leo’s conception of the primacy was ever recognised in the eastern churches – or even in Africa. Leo clearly hoped that his *Tomus* would be accepted without discussion at the Council of Chalcedon. It was, however, subjected to discussion and some hard things were said about Rome. What we should today call a “schema” was worked out by some of the bishops, led by the patriarch of Constantinople, and incorporated nothing from Leo’s document. Apart from the Roman representatives and a few of the eastern bishops the great majority at the council welcomed this schema and shouted such things as “Whoever doesn’t accept this schema is a Nestorian and should go to Rome”. It was only when the emperor forced them to choose between Dioscorus and Leo (whether to say “of two natures” or “in two natures”) that the council fathers opted for Leo – they could not do otherwise since Dioscorus had already been condemned. Nor was Leo’s authority in any way able to enforce the council’s decrees throughout the whole Church. As all the careful work that de Vries has published over the years goes to show, the Orthodox have never accepted, and they never will accept, the primacy of Rome in the form that it has taken since the Middle Ages. A certain primacy has been recognised, and has been practised, in the east, and what de Vries has also shown is that it has

gone beyond mere primacy of *honour*. But as to how “Petrine” the papal practice and ideology of today may be, that is another question. De Vries opens his paper by noting that it is not his task to decide in what sense St Peter exercised any primacy in the early Church. In any event (he goes on) St Peter never ruled the Church as the popes of our day do. We read in the Acts of the Apostles (8:14 f) that the Apostolic College in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to complete the work of Philip who had been preaching and baptising there. Imagine (says de Vries) reading in the newspapers today that the synod of bishops or the college of cardinals had “sent” the present pope on any such mission. It would be unimaginable. There is a vast gulf between the position of St Peter among the Apostles and the position of the successor of St Peter among the successors of the Apostles! Again, when Peter went to Caesarea to visit Cornelius he was “sent for” (Acts 10:17 and 29), and when he got back to Jerusalem he had to defend himself, in the presence of the apostles and the brethren, against criticisms from the circumcision party among them (Acts 11:1 ff). As de Vries says, it would be unimaginable that a pope today might be called to explain himself in such a fashion.

There is a certain sadness and nostalgia in such reflections, perhaps as one might expect from a fine scholar who has given most of his life to reducing the misunderstanding and estrangement between east and west. Scholars and theologians can only do so much. In the end it must fall to the bishop of Rome to show himself, in faith and believably, as the successor of Simon Peter. Perhaps it is worth remembering what happened when Peter reached Caesarea (Acts 10:24 ff):

Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying “Stand up; I too am a man”.

Concluded