

The Primacy of Peter: Theology and Ideology—I

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I

It is now clear enough that the disturbance in the Catholic world caused by the publication of *Humanae Vitae* was a symptom of much deeper stirrings in the Church than a difference of opinion about contraceptive methods of family limitation. We have to recognize that a profound shift of Catholic consciousness had already begun to take place, and that the publication of Paul VI's encyclical served to precipitate this new consciousness and to make its protest against the old articulate.

The visible structure of the older Catholic consciousness is easily described: within the period between Pius IX and Pius XII, Catholics recognized their distinctive identity, especially in England, in terms of an explicit awareness of the Pope, Mary, eucharistic devotions as well as Mass, Friday abstinence and the unlawfulness of 'unnatural' methods of birth control. It is instructive to recall that the Pope who confirmed his predecessor's withdrawal of the discussion of contraception from Vatican II and who could not accept the recommendations of his theological commission is also the Pope who insisted on giving Mary the title of *Mater Ecclesiae* in his allocution of 21st November, 1964, at the close of the third period of Vatican II, although the title was after consideration excluded from the chapter on Mary in the constitution *Lumen Gentium* on the Church; thus Paul VI continued the tradition of Pius IX and Pius XII in associating Pope and Mary in a special relationship to the Church. Paul VI is also the Pope of the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* on the Eucharist. We must recognize in all the present Pope's utterances a deep anxiety to preserve the real values of the older Catholic consciousness; what we must ask is whether these values can only be preserved within a perspective which is structured in terms of those values alone, or whether, reintegrated into a more inclusive ecclesial consciousness, they may not continue to nourish and illuminate a newer mode of the Catholic mind in living coherence with other values which hardly became explicit in the older perspective.

The work of Vatican II may perhaps be best seen as a major effort to make explicit what I have elsewhere called the ecclesiological *a priori* of theology. It is Vatican II itself, and the preliminary studies of its theological architects, which have allowed us to review in terms of ecclesiology the theological consciousness which has found expression throughout the centuries of the history

of the Church. Whereas it was quite recently common to maintain that there was no theological treatment of ecclesiology prior to the twentieth century (the word 'ecclesiology' itself is a newcomer), studies of the 'ecclesiology' of writers of all periods now proliferate. The fact is that the 'ecclesiologies' of these older authors have to be elicited by historical reconstruction as the unconscious *a priori* of their explicit theologies. One of the distinctive features of our own experience of the Church today is that in spite of the work of Vatican II many people in the Church are still unconsciously governed by an ecclesiological *a priori* which is not that of Vatican II and which only found expression in what might be called 'symptomatic' themes. The symptomatic themes of the unconscious ecclesiology prior to Vatican II have already been listed. These symptomatic themes are tenaciously clung to perhaps because it is obscurely felt, rightly, that their ecclesiological *a priori* would be recognized to be inadequate and would be dissolved once the themes are integrated into a more inclusive ecclesiological consciousness. The difficulties of our situation are only intensified by the fact that it is just those themes which are singled out for hostile attention by people claiming to speak out of a new ecclesiological consciousness, although quite frequently they have never seriously investigated their own *a prioris* and merely assert new symptomatic themes with a naive arrogance.

The foregoing observations have been deliberately phrased in language reminiscent of depth psychology on the one hand and Kant on the other. This is partly to recognize that by undertaking to examine the theological sense of the papacy in the Church one is touching an extremely tender point in the life of the Church today. But it is also to draw attention to the possibility of practising ecclesiological studies in ontological, as well as psycho-analytic and epistemological, depth. I must also ask to be allowed to confess that like everyone else in the Church today, I am personally involved in the birth-pangs of a new consciousness, and that I cannot hope to have achieved the serenity of a mature contemporary ecclesiological consciousness. It may be shameful to have to admit it, but it is only in recent months that I have made any separate study of the history of the papacy, a study in which some attempt has been made to question the perspectives in which that history is commonly recorded by Catholic historians and commonly read by Catholic readers, including myself. Clearly such a study could only have been superficial; but I must record that the effect of this reading has been one of deep shock. This has very little to do with the notorious immoralities of an Alexander VI, or the abject irrelevance of the so-called *saeculum obscurum*, the papacy of the tenth century. It is not the depths to which the papacy has sunk but the heights to which it has climbed which raise the most searching questions for the Christian conscience. I have been bound to ask myself whether the papacy has not done more harm than good to the Church of Christ. From the

time of Victor and the paschal controversy to the present day, with very few exceptions, a violent, intolerant dominativeness has been a characteristic mode of papal utterance and behaviour. Great, even saintly men, seem to have been the victims of a cruel, un-Christian system. No one who has not himself undertaken a study of this papal history, after to some extent freeing himself from an older *a priori*, should question the fairness of this description (a beginning might be made with the excellent papers of R. A. Markus and Eric John in their book *Papacy and Hierarchy*, Sheed and Ward, 1969), especially since a pious papalism of devotion (supported by a ruthless curial papalism of terror) has been the presupposition of Catholic consciousness in the era before John XXIII and Vatican II.

For someone like myself who firmly wishes to remain a Roman Catholic the Christian justification of the papacy becomes a matter of urgent and acute concern. This justification is not sufficiently to be found in large world-historical views which exhibit the role of the papacy in the emergence of Europe and the West, especially from the time of Gregory the Great and later Stephen II. The only satisfactory justification of the papacy lies in showing that it is an intrinsic element in the *mysterion* of God's eternal purpose for man in Jesus Christ. It seems to me that this involves providing a justification for the papacy in terms of a theological ontology, for it is only in these terms that one can adequately distinguish the theology of the papacy from its ideology, that ideology which has been the normal vehicle of the theology of the papacy for so many centuries.

Finally, it does not seem to me that many contemporary well-meaning attempts to 'place' the papacy within the apostolic or episcopal college and so to contain its saving or destructive power and energy are likely to lead very far. The claim which has consistently been made for the primacy of Peter and his successors is for a unique primacy in the Church of Christ, and this claim is not adequately met by any definition of a role, even that of head, within the apostolic or episcopal college. The Petrine claim is not merely an institutional, it is an ontological claim. The question is whether this ontological claim is a Christian one.

II

There is very great need of an historical dictionary of theological terms, perhaps on the lines of Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament*. One of the terms which would be dealt with in such a dictionary would be 'primacy', *primatus*. In the constitution 'Pastor Aeternus' of Vatican I it is laid down that the Apostle Peter received not merely a *primatum honoris* but a *primatum iurisdictionis* from Christ (DS 3055). The next chapter of the constitution goes on to speak of the perpetuity of this Petrine primacy in the Roman Pontiffs. It should be noted that this primacy of jurisdiction is spoken of as identical in the Apostle Peter and his successors, the

bishops of the Roman See, whereas it is usually recognized that only some restricted part of the Apostolic office as such is transmitted to the successors of the Apostles, the bishops, since the Apostles, as Founders of the Church and immediate organs of revelation, share in the historically unique, 'ephapactic' character of the beginning, while their successors and continuers of their mission rest on their foundation and transmit their revelation. 'Whoever succeeds Peter in this chair (*cathedra*), receives Peter's primacy over the entire Church by Christ's institution' (DS 3057). This Petrine primacy is transmitted whole and entire.

It becomes all the more urgent to enquire whether this opposition of two sorts of primacy, one of honour, the other of jurisdiction, is in fact exhaustive; or whether there is not some other sort of primacy as well. It may be that the 'primacy of jurisdiction' is capable of analysis into ideological and theological parts, since the phrase is being used to exclude what is thought to be its only alternative, the primacy of honour. In what follows, we shall argue that there is a third kind of primacy, an ontological primacy, to be defined in theological terms, which has been consistently confused with an ideological primacy in the expression 'primacy of jurisdiction'.

Some indication of the kind of fluctuation in the early use of the term *primatus* may be found in the canons of the first four ecumenical councils and their Latin versions, though the exact sense of the expressions has been the subject of intensive scholarly discussion. The title of the sixth canon of Nicaea, in the Latin version of Dionysius Exiguus, runs 'de primatibus episcoporum', rendering *peri tôn prôteiôn* of the Greek (*Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, ed. Jedin *et al.*, 1962, p. 8). In the text of the canon itself, *presbeia*, which is later to have *primatus* as its equivalent, is rendered by *privilegia*. The canon itself is concerned with the metropolitan or embryonic patriarchal authority of certain sees over ordinations in the neighbouring territory: the rights of Rome are referred to as an example. In the famous third canon of Constantinople, the bishop of Constantinople is said to have the *primatum honoris* (*ta presbeia tês timês*) after the Bishop of Rome, since Constantinople is the new Rome (Jedin, p. 28). In what is thought to be the text of a Roman synod held under Damasus in 382, this canon is responded to in a very clear and peremptory way. It is said that although the Catholic Churches spread throughout the world form a single bridal-bed (*thalamus*) of Christ, the holy Roman Church is raised up above all other Churches, and not in virtue of any conciliar decrees; rather, it has received the primacy by the gospel word of our Lord and Saviour himself: 'Thou art Peter . . .' (I follow the text as given in the so-called 'Decree of Gelasius', DS 350. If the decree does in fact go back to Damasus, this is the first really clear use of the 'Petrine text', Matt. 16, 18s., to justify the Roman primacy). This part of the decree concludes by establishing an order among the great sees, all

in virtue of a relationship to Peter: first Rome, then Alexandria, consecrated by Mark in Peter's name, then Antioch, where Peter dwelt before coming to Rome.

Finally, in the equally famous canon 28 of Chalcedon (Jedin, pp. 75-6), a primacy (*presbeia*) is claimed for Constantinople, the new Rome. Whatever the precise sense of the claim, it is rejected by Pope Leo as an injury to the rights of Alexandria and Antioch (not of Rome), and also because it bases the claim on such secular grounds as the location of imperial authority, not on the divine grounds of Scripture (ep. 104 ad Marcianum, PL 54, 995). The claim seems to be for the same kind of authoritative primacy as was spoken of in the sixth canon of Nicaea.

One final example of the use of *primatus* comes from what is now widely thought to be Cyprian's own first recension of his *De unitate Ecclesiae*, ch. 4. Here it is said that *primatus Petro datur*, in a sense of 'primacy' which it is argued could be interpreted at Rome as an authoritative primacy, but which by Cyprian himself is meant only as a 'seniority' (Bévenot) or a 'priority in time' (G. S. M. Walker, *The Churchmanship of St Cyprian*, 1968). It seems preferable to see this 'primacy' as an *originality*, a temporal priority which has the unique significance of being *first* (cf. Cyprian's language in this chapter of *unitatis originem* and the parallel text of the second recension, *exordium ab unitate proficiscitur*).

From these few examples we may see that the opposition of the *primatus honoris* and the *primatus iurisdictionis* is highly over-simplified. The primacy of jurisdiction itself was thought of primarily as a metropolitan or patriarchal right to supervise the ecclesiastical life of a territory adjacent to an apostolic see, and historically the patriarchal rights of the Roman See were confined to the West and what has now become the Latin Church. In both the *primatus honoris* and the Cyprianic sense of *primatus* as a source of the unity of the Church there seems to be an ill-defined sense of a more profound primacy, pointing perhaps in the direction of what was called above an 'ontological' primacy. It is in the sermons and writings of Leo the Great that we find what is still the most satisfactory articulation of the consciousness of this deeper primacy, overlaid (so it will be argued) by a juridical terminology which will serve the later papacy as the basis for a papal ideology of power.

III

There is at least one aspect of the famous sermons preached by St Leo on the anniversary of his episcopal consecration which does not seem to have been sufficiently adverted to; and that is that they are in fact anniversary sermons, and for that reason exhibit the same kind of temporal structure as the sermons preached by him during the course of the liturgical year. Thus, in a careful study by Dom Maria Bernard de Soos (*Le Mystère liturgique d'après s. Léon le*

Grand, 1958), the sense of the *Hodie* of many of the sermons for the liturgical seasons is shown to include by a kind of 'sacramental' identification the time of the originating event within the day in serial time on which the sermon is preached. Or as the translator of the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition of Leo's sermons puts it, the liturgical celebrations, 'while they recall the saving events of the Redeemer's life, make them really live again in their saving efficacy; they are 'signs', *sacramenta*, which re-present for believers the acts which the Saviour has accomplished once for all' (Dolle, in t. 1, p. 66, n. 1).

It is primarily because the time-horizons of Leo's anniversary sermons are the same as those of his seasonal sermons that Leo can make that 'sacramental' identification of himself with Peter which Jalland, for instance (*St Leo the Great*, 1941), found somewhat disconcerting. The 'event' of Leo's own ordination coincides 'sacramentally' with the 'event' in which the Lord institutes Peter in his *honor*, his office of dignity in the Church, and can be re-presented each year, such that Peter's institution persists in and sustains Leo's.

It is noteworthy that Leo takes up easily the traditional theme according to which it is Peter's faith that is crowned and confirmed by the Lord's institution. 'The solidity of Peter's faith is enduring; and just as what Peter believed abides in Christ, so there abides what Christ instituted in Peter' (serm. 3; PL 54; 145). 'On this rock, Jesus says, I will set up an eternal temple, and the heights of my Church towering up into heaven will rise up upon the firmness of this faith' (s. 4, 150). The importance of this becomes clear from an absorbing study by J. Meyendorff ('St Peter in Byzantine Theology', in Meyendorff *et al.*, *The Primacy of Peter*, 1963), who shows that the Byzantine theologians continued to speak in this tradition even after the schism because in the tradition, common to East and West, the Petrine text of Matt. 16, 18s., was not thought of as applying to the Bishop of Rome in particular but to all the faithful and especially to all bishops.¹

Leo is perfectly clear that every Christian shares in the royal priesthood of Christ in virtue of his faith and baptism. In sermon 4 he insists that no matter what differences of office there may be in the Church, all are 'one in Christ' (Gal. 3, 28) and all are attached to the head of the body:

Thus in the unity of faith and baptism we have an undivided fellowship and a shared dignity, as the blessed Peter says: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2, 9). For all who are reborn in Christ are made kings by the sign of the Cross, consecrated priests by the anointing of the Spirit; so that apart from that subjection in the ministerial

¹It is plausibly argued that it was Pope Stephen's use in a 'papalist' sense of Cyprian's reference to the Matthaean text which made Cyprian revise his original version of the *De Unitate Ecclesiae*. For Cyprian, the Matthaean text signifies 'the authority of the bishops, each in his own Church' (Bévenot). In general, see J. Ludwig, *Die Primatsworte in der altkirchlichen Exegese*, 1952, and F. Dvornik, *Byzance et la primauté Romaine*, Paris, 1964.

service which is peculiar to us (Leo is referring to himself here), each and every spiritual Christian should understand and acknowledge that he shares in the royal dignity and the priestly office. . . . Now since by God's grace this has been made common to all, it is devout and praiseworthy for you to celebrate the day of our elevation as though it were your own honour and dignity, so that in the whole body of the Church a single sacramental mystery of high-priesthood (*pontificii sacramentum*) should be celebrated (4, 148-9).

This last sentence is especially significant. Leo sees the festival celebration of the anniversary of his elevation as a 'sacramental' action in which the 'sacramental' *participation* of all Christians in the high-priesthood of Christ is renewed; the consecrated ministerial priesthood of the Bishop of Rome is the 'sacramental' *representation* of the general priesthood of all believers throughout the Church.

It is in virtue of this inclusive 'sacramental' consciousness that Leo can go on in the same sermon to make daunting claims for himself as Peter's successor. Leo asks his hearers to celebrate this anniversary day in veneration of him who was flooded with such abundant streams from the very source of all graces (*charismatum*) that while he alone received so much no one else received anything except by participation in him. Leo refers this concentration of graces to the Incarnation itself. The Word made flesh was already dwelling among us, and all things in heaven and on earth were subject to him, nothing was beyond the power of a *sacramentum* which the unity of his own godhead and the Trinity were simultaneously enacting:

And yet out of the whole world this individual Peter is chosen and set at the head of the vocation of all peoples, of all the Apostles, of all the fathers of the Church; such that although there are many priests and pastors in the people of God, it is Peter who rightly rules them, ruled simultaneously as they are in the first place by Christ (*omnes tamen proprie regat Petrus, quos principaliter regit et Christus*). Beloved, the divine condescension has bestowed a great and marvellous association (*consortium*) in its power upon this man; and if it was its will that other leaders should have something in common with Peter, it was only through him that it gave whatever it did not deny to others.

Leo goes on to support this exposition of Peter's powers by an analysis of Matt. 16. It was Peter alone who spoke for the disciples in confessing the Lord's true dignity. The Lord is the unshakable rock, the corner stone, the foundation, who by calling Peter 'Rock', makes him share in the solidity of the Lord; so that what is by the Lord's authority proper to him, is to be shared with Peter by participation. So, in the words of a text already quoted, the temple of the Church towers up into heaven upon the basis of Peter's faith.

We may see foreshadowed in this conception what later showed

itself in a terminological shift from *Vicarius Petri* to *Vicarius Christi*. It is however essential to see that in Leo's mind the extraordinary claims made for Peter (and his successor) are an exposition of a 'sacrament' enacted by the incarnate Word when he conferred upon Peter in response to his confession of faith a participation in his own unique dignity; now this 'sacrament' is the effectual symbol of a participation in Christ of all those who believe. It may seem from Leo's words that he is claiming for Peter (and his successors) a mediatorial role in the communication of all graces which has been committed to him by the Mediator Jesus Christ. This claim, even if it were a possible interpretation of Leo's words, must of course be resolutely rejected. But it is also possible to see that participation in Christ by faith, common to all believers, implies and requires a symbolic representation of that single and common participation, and that the Petrine office in the Church provides such a symbolic representation of the one faith of all believers. We may even go further and argue that if this symbolic representation of the one faith is rejected, a contradiction arises, damaging to the faith itself, between that faith and its public profession. Leo's view could then be interpreted in the public order of the Church, such that Peter's public confession of faith, continued in his successors, is the effectual symbol of the unity of the public faith confessed by the Church, remembering that a discontinuity between internal, subjective faith and communal, professed faith, is a more familiar possibility in our time than in Leo's.

It should now be reasonably clear that the continuance of Peter's profession of faith and its associated participation in Christ is seen by Leo as a 'sacramental' identity of Peter and his successors. But in recent years it has been forcefully maintained by Professor Walter Ullmann (see especially 'Leo I and the theme of Papal Primacy', *JTS* XI (1960), pp. 25-52; also *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., 1962) that Leo, faced with the problem of establishing a continuity between Peter and his successors, found his solution by adopting Roman juridical categories, notably that of the *haeres*, according to which the heir continues the deceased, the latter is literally continued in the former: 'Haereditas est successio in universum ius' (art. cit. pp. 33s.). Professor Ullmann also feels bound to insist that this juristic solution of the problem of identity is the only satisfactory one, and that no other solution is or was possible. This is not the place to discuss his claim, but it may be noted that although his great learning has thrown much light on a whole dimension of ecclesiological thinking, Professor Ullmann seems strangely insensitive to other dimensions of ecclesiology.¹ In his new synoptic work, *L'Écclésiologie du haut Moyen-Âge* (1968), which

¹See Professor Geoffrey Barraclough's note in his excellent book, *The Medieval Papacy*, 1968, p. 198. In general, on the growth of legal institutions in the Church, see c.g. Gaudemet's volume, *L'Église dans l'Empire Romain*, 1958, in the *Histoire de Droit et des Institutions de l'Église en Occident*, edited by Le Bras, and Feine's one-volume *Kirchliche Rechtsgeschichte*, 4th ed., 1964.

will clearly become a standard work for any ecclesiohistorian, Fr Y. Congar remarks:

Nous croyons que l'idée institutionnelle-juridique du pape comme vicair de Pierre au sens de son successeur, ne suffit pas à rendre compte de ce qui s'exprime dans ces textes. Nous espérons montrer ailleurs que l'idée de *vicarius* comportait alors une valeur en quelque sorte sacramentelle de présence opérante de Pierre sous et dans une autre existence historique (p. 189).

For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to note the simultaneous presence, in Leo's consciousness of himself as Peter's successor, of sacramental and juridical motives and themes. What was to happen in succeeding centuries was a development and expansion of the juridical themes, while the sacramental themes became less and less distinct. Yet it may be suggested that the sense of sacramental continuity was the source of energy for what, in an inappropriate juridical idiom, became the monstrous claims of a Gregory VII or a Boniface VIII. In its 'sacramental' expression (in the pregnant sense of 'sacrament' for Leo) Leo's reflections on the papal office would seem to provide elements for a theology of what was earlier in this article called an *ontological* primacy of Peter; the decay of the sacramental consciousness led to a jurisdictional or 'political' theology of the primacy which was to find its most balanced expression in Vatican I. These are clearly massive over-simplifications of an exceedingly complex historical process; all that is offered here is an indication of the way in which a symbolic, sacramental or quasi-sacramental theology of papal primacy may better express the fundamental intentions of Vatican I and thus offer a different perspective in which to evaluate the place of the papacy in the Church today. (An essential complement to what has been said here is the fundamental article by L. Hertling, S.J., 'Communio und Primat—Kirche und Papstum in der christlichen Antike', *Una Sancta* 17 (1962), pp. 91-125. I understand that an English translation of this article will shortly be published as a small book.)

(to be completed next month)