

CHANGEABLE AND UNCHANGEABLE ELEMENTS IN CONCILIAR TEACHING

Ever since the first appearance of Newman's famous essay more than a century ago, the development of doctrine has been an important theme among Roman Catholic theologians; and it is the theme which most naturally serves as the point of departure for this discussion.

This is not because the two questions are identical: 1) the development of doctrine, and 2) the changeable and the unchangeable in conciliar teaching. Actually, the two questions are quite distinct, and we should be careful not to confuse them. Nevertheless, the second question cannot be treated unless in the context of the first. The first question, that of the development of doctrine, addresses itself to the coming *into* being of conciliar teaching; whereas the second question, that of the changeable and unchangeable in conciliar teaching, at least examines the possibility that what had once come *into* being might later on in some sense pass *out* of being: that is to say, might somehow be modified, amended perhaps, or substituted for by something else more appropriate, or even discarded or contradicted. But, quite obviously, there could be little or no discussion about such a spectrum of change unless what had first come *into* being (through the development of doctrine) was taken to be capable of change in principle. Let us consider a concrete instance. The Council of Nicaea taught that Christ Jesus, the Eternal Word, is *consubstantial* with the Father; and the Council of Chalcedon taught that Christ Jesus is one *person* in two distinct *natures*. Now everyone knows that these *expressions* (*consubstantial, person, nature*) had not been part of the primitive revelation: for all practical purposes, not part of the New Testament message. But if the expressions were nonetheless merely *another way of saying* what *had* been in the New Testament, then to ask if they could somehow change in a later day would be to ask if the New Testament itself could somehow change in a later day, and with the contrary being clearly presumed. For

between Nicaea and Chalcedon on the one hand, and the New Testament on the other, there would be only a *verbal* difference—a position, by the way, long maintained by the more fundamentalist Roman Catholic theology. If, however, what Nicaea and Chalcedon *added* to the New Testament was far more than a merely verbal addition to the primitive New Testament revelation, then it is at least possible to consider how what had been *added* might later on somehow be *changed*—and to make such a consideration without prejudice to the presumed essential *unchangeableness* of the New Testament message.

(At this point, we should insert by way of parenthesis that we are not here and now discussing “changeable and unchangeable elements *in the New Testament revelation!*” That is why we just made reference to “the presumed essential *unchangeableness* of the New Testament message.” For our present question concerns not changeable and unchangeable elements in the New Testament teaching, but changeable and unchangeable elements in conciliar teaching. And this latter question is generally posed in a context which implicitly presumes the *unchangeableness* of the primitive revelation, and therefore, since the two will be substantially equated, the *unchangeableness* of the New Testament message. But even with reference to the New Testament message, it seems that we have to speak in terms of what is truly essential and what is not. We think, for instance, of its teaching—or at the very least, what it took for granted—on slavery, or on the social status of women vis-à-vis men in the community. With these few remarks, however, we must leave this further question and return to the topic assigned: the changeable and unchangeable in conciliar teaching.)

Thus far in our discussion of this topic, I fear that we have been speaking a bit too abstractly. In the main part of our presentation, therefore, we might best proceed as follows: first, we propose to identify one block of conciliar teaching, and it is a huge block, that is under theological criticism at the present moment: in the writings, for example, of John A. T. Robinson, Harvey Cox, and Leslie Dewart: secondly, in terms of what was just outlined in our introduction, we would like to consider, at least briefly, the explanation which Bernard Lonergan has offered as to what happened

when such teaching came *into* being as some sort of addition to the primitive revelation; thirdly, we would like to put forward our own personal suggestion as to how such teaching may continue to be recognized as true in itself, but also as of considerably reduced relevance, and in this qualified sense outmoded; fourthly and finally, we want to mention, for the sake of intellectual objectivity, the rather different, and in part conflicting, approach that is taken by Father Edward Schillebeeckx.

First, then, the block of conciliar teaching which we have in mind at the moment is that comprising the great Trinitarian and Christological councils of the fourth and fifth centuries: chiefly Nicaea and Chalcedon. In his highly radical study, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, Paul van Buren analyzes this period in terms of the hellenization process through which the New Testament "talk about *Jesus*" became the patristic and ecclesiastical "talk about *God*." The New Testament had referred to Jesus, for instance, as "the Son of God"—yes—but the meaning was that of filial obedience; for such had been the meaning of the Old Testament symbolism. Nicaea, however, transformed this symbolism into the *substance, nature, being* vocabulary of Hellenic thought: defined that Jesus is "consubstantial with the Father"; and in this way, Jesus, the "*man* for others," became divinized. Chalcedon in 451 completed the process by defining that Jesus was one "person" in two integral "natures", the human and the divine.

Now Paul van Buren is not, of course, the first to have commented upon the hellenization phenomenon. Nor, unlike so many others both past and present, does he flay against or ridicule the patristic achievement. As he sees it, the Fathers were true to their lights; but so must we today be true to ours: and so we simply cannot take at face value this *substance-person-nature* theology that the Fathers developed. If it served a purpose in history, and van Buren, compared with others a good deal less radical, is rather generous on the point, nevertheless, it must now be discarded. Van Buren, therefore, would like to remove from contemporary Christianity the formulations of these great Trinitarian and Christological councils.

Others may not go so far; yet their continued acceptance of this particular conciliar teaching is qualified and almost minimal. Bishop

John Robinson in *Honest to God* professes his acceptance of Nicaea, very explicitly in fact, but quite obviously he has given up hope that the *substance-person-nature* symbolism is still meaningful for today's Christian. The position of Harvey Cox in *The Secular City* is much the same. Leslie Dewart in his *Future of Belief* calls for a total reassessment of the whole hellenization phenomenon.

Nor is dissatisfaction confined to Christianity's radical fringe. The reservations in this respect of Oscar Cullmann, a quite conservative Protestant theologian, on the ultimate value of the conciliar, as opposed to biblical, Christology are well known—as is also the fact that his sentiments are shared by a number of Roman Catholic exegetes and biblical theologians.

Let us put the question bluntly, therefore: is it possible that what was defined (the Roman Catholic will want to say *infallibly* defined) by Nicaea and Chalcedon on the constitution of Christ—and at least to some extent we could perhaps add by Trent on original sin, by Vatican I on elements of the supernatural order—is it *possible* that all this teaching could in any way be changed? To put the same question more technically, is all this teaching timeless, absolute, necessary, and hence unchangeable in principle, or is it rather of certain historical periods, in this sense relative and contingent, and hence at least in some way and degree patient of subsequent change?

To move toward an answer to this question, however provisional such an answer might be, we believe that it would prove worthwhile to consider for a few moments Bernard Lonergan's explanation for the coming *into* being of the same conciliar teaching. Lonergan—we are thinking now of his lengthy essay introducing the *Pars Systematica* of his Trinity text (1964 edition)—takes for granted, first of all, that what was formulated by Nicaea and Chalcedon, that Jesus is consubstantial with the Father and one person in two natures, is *not* simply another way of saying the same thing that was proclaimed in the New Testament. His recognition of the *extent* of change involved, therefore, goes as far as Karl Rahner's in the first and fourth volumes of the *Schriften zur Theologie*. Positively, Nicaea and Chalcedon added something of their own—not

just words or external expression, moreover, but a new understanding: a new understanding of the same ultimate truth.

For Lonergan, to think of Jesus as consubstantial with the Father is not to add a new *truth* to what the New Testament had revealed of Jesus, who is Lord, Son of Man, Son of God in power, and who somehow (if this interpretation is allowed to stand) exercised a role at the creation of the world. To think of Jesus as consubstantial with the Father is not to add a new *truth* to the *truth* underlying such New Testament titles and themes, but rather to *understand* and *express* this *same truth* in another way: more systematically, more theologically. And the *understanding* is really new, and a product of a gradual evolution over a considerable period of time. In its ultimate refinement, the *understanding* belongs to the fourth century, in no sense to the first.

In this fashion, Lonergan seeks to account for two elements: 1) first, the immutability of the primitive revelation; no new *truths* are added or old *truths* taken, so to speak, away; revelation is "closed" and it is inviolable; 2) secondly, the demonstrable phenomena of *de facto* change; consubstantiality and dyphsism belong not to the New Testament, its period and culture, but to the fourth and fifth-century hellenists.

But right here a difficulty arises: does not Lonergan *also* maintain that if, from one point of view, consubstantiality and dyphsism are what was relative to the fourth and fifth centuries, from another and different point of view consubstantiality and dyphsism represent understandings that are necessary and absolute—regardless of who it happened to be, historically, first to have come by them? As a matter of fact, Lonergan does. His point is that to transpose "Jesus is Lord" (and other New Testament titles and themes describing and dramatizing Jesus' identity) into "consubstantial with the Father," is to move from what is "prior" in our human way of apprehending things to what is "prior" in itself, objectively, scientifically, from the *inside*, as it were, of the reality itself. Or to put it a bit differently, "consubstantial with the Father" declares Jesus' unequivocal divinity, and—more than that—assigns its ultimate cause (or quasi-cause, since we are talking of God): Jesus is divine *because* he is of the same substance as the Father.

As Lonergan had left the question in the 1964 edition of his dogma text, therefore, the possibility for a change in conciliar teaching itself was first opened, and then, it would appear, closed off again. It was opened inasmuch as Lonergan recognized the conciliar teaching as not merely repeating or restating the New Testament revelation, but as *adding* to it, and adding precisely what was peculiar to a certain people at a certain moment in history. As such understandings were relative and contingent coming *into* being, could they not therefore someday, and at least in some meaningful sense, pass *out* of being? But it seems not. For even aside from the more general problem of the immutability of *dogma* as a dogmatic theologian might be expected to raise it, there is, in Lonergan's mind, the more strictly *theological* problem of a movement from the particular and the contingent to the absolute and the necessary: for this is the whole significance of his principle governing the transposition from the "*priora quoad nos*" to the "*priora quoad se*." In other words, then, and we say this reverently, where Nicaea and Chalcedon are in question are we not stuck with it?

But Lonergan did not leave the matter there. More recently, in a lecture delivered on May 12, 1965, and now published as the sixteenth and final chapter in the volume entitled simply *Collection*, Lonergan has given his own name (and nuance) in support of the thesis defended today by a growing number of intellectuals that classical culture is dead. But the formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon—which Lonergan almost certainly has before his mind at this juncture—are a most obvious and indisputable product of precisely that classical culture. And so Lonergan adds that the passing of the classical culture (and we might insert the culture which structured its insights in the *substance-person-nature* idiom) will have a profound effect upon Christian theology and philosophy. Up to the moment, however, Lonergan has not further enlarged upon this general observation. Nevertheless, his remarks in "Dimensions of Meaning," the lecture being referred to, are quite sufficient to show that if Nicaea and Chalcedon declare the absolute and the necessary—that is, the "*priora quoad se*"—they do so, on the other hand, from a still particular point of view: the point of view that distinguishes between "*priora quoad se*" and "*priora quoad nos*" in the

first place, the point of view that has always been known as metaphysics. The possibility of modification, therefore, is open once again. And it is important, we would like to suggest, that it is in fact open in this way to an extremely prominent Roman Catholic theologian who is by no means listed as belonging to Christianity's radical fringe.

Against this background, we would like to offer our own tentative solution—perhaps elements of solution would be better still.

If the classical patterns of thought are actually dead (except, of course, to the extent that the past is always alive in its evolutionary contribution to the present), and dead—today—as even Lonergan is willing to admit that they are dead, then we suggest that the formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon (we could add Trent and Vatican I), insofar as they are products of the classical patterns of thought, are necessarily less relevant—today—than they were in the remote, and even quite recent, past. For the living teaching of the Church must always speak to the contemporary community, and the contemporary community no longer talks or understands this classical language.

But what, then, of the immutability of dogma? We would suggest here that we have to recognize a distinction between what is true in itself, and in its proper context, on the one hand, and what is not only true, but also perfectly relevant, now, and in the context of this particular moment. Thus, the definitions which we have been talking about are true—Christian Faith believes infallibly so—and therefore they remain true, but in their proper context. The Church will never give a contradictory reply to the very same question raised in the very same historical context and with everything that this implies. On the other hand, the very same question and the very same context may well have become—for the greater part, and not improbably for the far greater part—a thing of the past.

Nor should this surprise us. It in nowise implies that what Christian Tradition has handed down about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, about the personality and work of Christ Jesus, has become—with the passing of the classical culture—less important. For the great trinitarian councils, to begin with these, Nicaea and Constantinople I, did not *restate* the *entirety* of the Father-Son-

Spirit revelation, as unfortunately has usually been assumed, and as the present writer discusses in his article on the "Holy Trinity" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Rather, they preoccupied themselves only with a *certain limited aspect* of the Father-Son-Spirit revelation: the relation, in terms of substance-person-nature thought, of the Son to the Father, of the Spirit to both the Father and the Son; what they addressed themselves to was not the whole revelation of man's return to the Father in co-sonship with the Son through possession of the Son's own Spirit—to cite the functional trinitarianism of Ignatius of Antioch, and ultimately of the New Testament—but what they addressed themselves to was rather the problematic of plurality in the unique and undivided Godhead. But again, this problematic, for all its importance, is merely one aspect of everything that was revealed of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that aspect—today—is coming more and more to be considered a good deal less important than a number of others. This is brought out, for example, by the way the treatment of the "*dogma trinitarium*" is postponed to the seventy-first question of Part One in the new catechism officially adopted by the German hierarchy.

Much the same can be said of the Christological definitions of Nicaea and Chalcedon. "Consubstantial with the Father," "one person in two natures," these articulations of Christian belief look only to the structure or constitution of Christ Jesus, and again in terms of the substance-person-nature pattern of classical thought. Hence, they recapitulate only a single aspect of the entire Christological revelation, and do so according to a frame of mind and idiom of expression that is now seen to have been a good deal more particular and contingent—historically—than was formerly taken for granted. Is it or is it not true that Christ Jesus is one person in two distinct natures, the human and the divine? It *is* true. But when we reply in this fashion that "it" *is* true, we are presuming that "it" is correctly understood. But outside of a rather closed circle, such understanding is hard to come by today: the formula, in fact, often conveys quite the opposite to its original intention. The man of today wants to stress, if anything, the "*human personality*" of Jesus. Chalcedon, however, prevents him: there is only one "personality" in Jesus and this divine. But the difficulty is simply that "personality" (or

"person") as intended by Chalcedon is quite different from "personality" as intended today. Secondly, while "it" *is* true, "it" says, and as a matter of fact always did say, a lot less about the identity and achievement of Jesus than theologians have long taken for granted. True, therefore: but in large measure no longer especially relevant in the living teaching of the Church.

Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, in a lecture given at St. Xavier College in Chicago last year, and now printed in the volume edited by T. Patrick Burke and entitled *The Word in History*, takes a rather different approach. For Schillebeeckx, if we are interpreting him correctly, one person in two distinct natures, the formula, is *no* less relevant today: but . . . *but* it is *now* to be understood in terms of all the significance and nuance that subsequent Christian thought, and especially the Christian phenomenology and existentialism of our own times, has brought to the key concepts: that is, "person" and "nature." Broadly speaking, the Chalcedonian formula is now to be interpreted phenomenologically and existentially.

Our personal reaction to such an approach, however, at least where the great trinitarian and Christological councils are in question, is that it goes too far out of its way—scientifically, historically—to preserve the *verbal formula*; whereas, if we recognized rather the vastly reduced relevance of this verbal formula, the effort would not be necessary. Our point of contention is not at all that Schillebeeckx wishes to maintain contact with the Chalcedonian formula and seek to interpret it, but rather with the attitude with which he maintains this contact and with the manner of his interpretation. First, he insists that the *ipsissima verba* be retained at all costs—for all practical purposes, just as the words of Scripture. But why? Secondly, he further insists that the same *ipsissima verba* be given the meaning of twentieth-century theology. But this is hardly historical. Even when one grants that the Chalcedonian formula stood at the primordial base of a process of evolution that has now resulted in the twentieth-century meaning, nevertheless that process has known so many twists and turns that the contemporary personalist theology cannot seriously be called "Chalcedon."

On the other hand, Schillebeeckx' proposal may be more in point in trying to establish the present-day significance and value of the

Tridentine explanation, say, of original sin. For here, the *ipsissima verba* are in a very real sense and to a very real degree those of Scripture. If in the Tridentine Decree there is something of Lonergan's movement toward theological understanding—a sharpening of language, an attempt to express more systematically—from another point of view, the same Decree merely restates (though this time with more theological sophistication) the accounts of *Genesis* and *Paul*. The story is a part of the primitive revelation, and it will never change. To this extent, then, neither will the Tridentine Decree that is so largely only the story's more sophisticated retelling. But both will be interpreted, and they will be interpreted in parallelism.

Biblical theology has already come to take for granted that much—very much!—in the story that has the appearance of historical statement of fact cannot possibly be so. The talking serpent is not to be taken, in the usual sense of the word, literally. The whole narrative is rather a highly symbolic portrayal of man's origins and human sinfulness. The objective reference behind the symbolism may be to an actual state or condition of man at a moment of origin. If this be the case, however, such a moment is not, in the usual sense of the word, historical. For the only human being that history knows is mortal; whereas man at this moment of origin would have been *immortal*. But perhaps the objective reference behind the symbolism is not to any moment of origin, historical or even metahistorical, in the first place; perhaps it is rather to what has been the human condition for as long as human beings, sinful and mortal, have existed, and to this condition precisely as contrasted with what God had nevertheless intended for man, and which is depicted in the story as the state of paradise and innocence. In any case, what is immutable in the Tridentine restatement must be determined by what is immutable in the biblical narrative—and the process of such interpretation is momentarily going on.

We shall conclude in brief. What is *unchangeable* in conciliar teaching? We suggest that what is unchangeable in conciliar teaching—changeless without qualification of any sort—is simply the *paradosis*, the *traditio*, of Irenaeus: in other words, the revealed essence of Christian Faith. And by *essence* here we do not mean essence as determined by theological analysis, but essence as ex-

pressed, first of all, in the few and simple particulars of the ancient Christian creeds which became woven into the text of the New Testament, the essence, therefore, as contained in the liturgical and catechetical recital of the basic mystery-events of salvation history: creation by God and the bondage of sin, reconciliation in Christ Jesus "the man for others," who lived and died as Yahweh's Suffering Servant and was therefore raised up by Him as Lord of the Church and the universe, and who will come again to judge the living and the dead. What the councils have added to these and the other mystery-events of the basic Christian Gospel is, of course, authentically Christian, and true—as interpretation, as understanding, as uniquely consistent conclusion—but nevertheless not absolutely unchangeable, or changeless without *any* qualification. In other instances, the conciliar teaching may have been only a more sophisticated retelling of the biblical story. Hence, as Christian consciousness becomes more aware of the *context* in which the biblical story itself is to be understood—the story of the Fall for example—so will the same Christian consciousness adjust its interpretation of the conciliar retelling, and perhaps modify, even seriously modify, the *context* in which the retelling has now to be understood.

What it comes down to is this: today's theologian has to take infallibility not less seriously, but more seriously, than in the past. By that, we mean that he has to treat infallibility both reverently and intelligently—by recognizing that it extends *without qualification* only to the essence of the Christian Gospel, the essence of Christian "faith and morals," and that the formula just used—"Christian faith and morals"—reduces, in the final analysis, to the *paradosis*, the *traditio*, of the little creeds, or Ur-creeds, that were incorporated into the New Testament text.

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