

THE MAGISTERIUM AND THEOLOGY

The Church is the community of faith brought together by the gratuitous call of God our Father. It is joined with Him through a new and everlasting covenant sealed in the blood of His Son. Quickened by the power of the Spirit, this community sees indeed, but "darkly as in a mirror" (I Cor. 13:12). Yet in the measure of light granted it, it gropes its pilgrim way toward "that everlasting city which is one day to be" (Heb. 13:15).

In this time of pilgrimage, the Spirit is poured forth into the hearts of believers "making some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers; so that all together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12).

It is clear that not all members of the body have the same function. It is also clear that inasmuch as all functions are the work of the Spirit, one cannot supplant the other or render it unimportant but "all together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ" (Eph. *loc. cit.*).

There emerges, then, a threefold task when dealing with the manifold functions in the body of Christ:

1. To understand the nature and scope of a given function
2. To determine its relationship to the body as a whole
3. To determine the special relationship which may exist between given cognate functions.

Necessarily underlying this effort is always the understanding that:

1. All functions are the gift "of one and the same Spirit" (I Cor. 12:11) claiming equal reverence from all.
2. All functions are given for service; and specifically for "unity in the work of service," with overall purpose of "building up the body of Christ" (Eph. *loc. cit.*).

II

It is abundantly evident from Scripture that the christian community has from the first known an office of leadership endowed with

authority.¹ Even the casual reader cannot miss the conviction of authority in the writings of Peter, Paul and John, the conviction of an authority coming not from men but from God and extending over the entire community. This authority appears as doctrinal, pastoral and disciplinary. John, for example, is definite on the point that "Every spirit which acknowledges Jesus Christ as having come to us in human flesh has God for its author; and no spirit which would disunite Jesus comes from God" (I John 4:2). No less definite is Paul warning that "if anyone preaches a version of the Good News different from the one we have already preached to you, whether it be ourselves or an angel from heaven, he is to be condemned" (Gal. 1:8). Elsewhere directives are given about conduct in the assembly, about collections, about dealing with weak consciences, about the attitude to be observed with members of the community who fail to live up to the demands of the Gospel. There is, then, no need to belabor the point that in the christian community from the outset there have been those who held a special office which they and the community understood as deriving from God and which empowered them to exercise final authority over the affairs of the community not only in doctrinal, but in disciplinary and pastoral matters as well. The issue at hand is concerned with only one aspect of that sacred office, the teaching function or magisterium.

It is the special role of those who hold this magisterial office in the community of faith to serve the other members of the community by certifying the authenticity of the beliefs they hold. It is a function inescapably judgmental and essentially custodial. Within the community this role belongs, in this sense, only to those who are heirs of the original apostolic office and who for that reason bear the chief responsibility for passing on "the faith once and for all handed down to the saints" (Jude, v. 3). They are charged as no others in the community are to preserve that original patrimony unalloyed "without spot or wrinkle" (Eph. 5:27).

Unfortunately, however, the long prevailing concept of the Church

¹ Cf. v.g. David M. Stanley, S. J., "Authority in the Church: A New Testament Reality" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 29 (1967) 555-573.

as pyramid has led its members to view themselves and their functions as a concatenation of hermetic segments: the bishops in their domain, the priests in theirs and the laity in theirs. In this view, each had its own proper business to attend to and the others were not expected to intrude.

The Second Vatican Council brought with it an expanded perspective. Now we see the Church rather as a community of faith which, as a *community*, is heir of the inheritance and witness of the Resurrection. We see it now no longer as a pyramid but as the family of God in which each member plays a role of service in loving obedience to the Spirit and dedication to the good of all.

So, the contingencies of history, the limitations of the human condition and the dominance of the pyramidal outlook have until recently conspired to give emphasis to the custodial role of the magisterium, even in the minds of theologians. There has been a general and pervading assumption that the all but exclusive function of the magisterium is the negative function of serving as a sort of D.E.W. line set up to dispatch fighter craft to shoot down the first sign of error which flickers on the radar screen. For the rest, the magisterium was expected to leave the field alone. But I do not believe that knuckle swatting, though a necessary service of the magisterium and hence to some extent inevitable, is its only or richest function.

Jesus told His apostles, "He who is to befriend you, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send on my account, will in turn make everything plain, and recall to your minds everything I have said to you" (John 14:25). Later in the same discourse, He continues, "I have still much to say to you, but it is beyond your reach as yet. It will be for him, the truth giving Spirit, when he comes, to guide you into all truth . . . He will utter the message that has been given to him; and he will make plain to you what is still to come" (John 16:13-14).

It seems to me, then, that a truly preeminent role of the magisterium should be to preside over the unfolding of the heritage of the faith, to plant and water (I Cor. 3:6) with joyous hope, with judicious discernment, always with firm reliance on the abiding pre-

sence of the Spirit and with that "love which casts out fear" (I John 4:18). This is not to deny the perennial need to speak courageously against errors and condemn them. The point is, rather, that the magisterium should see itself as under a *double* mandate: "to bring out of its treasury the new as well as the old" (Mt. 13:52). It cannot, of course, discharging its developmental role shirk its custodial responsibility. The mandate is twofold. Hence, it must always be at pains to discern how the new relates to the old lest the addition of the new mean the destruction of the old. Yet it must for all the burden involved not fear the new, not begrudge it or fail to bring it forth.

For too long now we have paralleled the hermetic pyramid of the Church at large with a hermetic view of the relationship between the magisterium and theology. We have worked under the fairly well defined assumption that the work of the magisterium is negative and custodial while the work of theology is positive and developmental. It is time, however, that we recognize that development in the heritage of the faith is the fruit of the Spirit working in the whole Church and therefore certainly in the magisterium. And so development is a true function of the magisterium as such, one which has not been sufficiently recognized perhaps even by the magisterium itself.

Pope Paul has beautifully styled this an hour in which the Church is caught up in the contemplation of itself. This contemplation with its new insights is bound to heighten the defects of the past and present, bound also to illumine the bright prospects of the future. There is reason then for joy in the reviving sensibility of the magisterium to its positive role in development.

III

When we address ourselves to theology, we can see it in two lights:

1. As an academic discipline
2. As a service within the community of faith

If we consider theology purely as another academic discipline, then it follows that it should enjoy the rights and responsibilities of

all other disciplines in the university. It should be neither inferior nor superior to any of the sciences or humanities.

But when we view theology as a service within the community of faith, then all sorts of new relationships arise. There is the relationship to the magisterium on the one hand and to the community of believers on the other.

The theologian as a member of the community must like all believers accept the judgmental, custodial and developmental role of the magisterium. A man of faith, his enterprise must begin and end in faith: "*Fides quaerens intellectum, intellectus quaerens fidem.*"

And so, as Father McCormick has written so well, the theologian should have a deep seated concern for the pastoral ramifications of his utterances and writings. Max Thurian put it this way:

In biological and chemical research there reigns a kind of international discipline which does not allow the sale of new medicines in the pharmacies until numerous experiments have been made and sure results have been obtained and there is total assurance that they are safe. Research scholars constitute a kind of universal community of mutual aid realized by means of congresses and scientific exchanges. It would be desirable if for the sake of the People of God, theologians would constitute a similar community and have enough pastoral sense not to popularize too quickly discoveries which are only provisory stages on the long road of research. To be a true scholar, the theologian should have a pastoral sense for the spiritual edification of Christians since he is doing his research in a subject which is the strength and consolation of the poorest. He knows that this truth, which is God, will always transcend his provisory approximations. He should have an ecclesial sensitivity since he believes that the truth is given to the universal community of Christians, that it is sometimes hidden from the wise and intelligent and revealed to the little ones and that it is a truth lived by a people and not possessed by an elite.²

² Max Thurian, "The One Bread", Part. 2, *The Crisis of Faith*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969, pp. 105-106.

IV

In conclusion, then, I would summarize my thoughts this way:

1. The truth is committed to the whole community of believers and is not the exclusive concern of the magisterium, of theologians or of any other isolated group within the community.
2. While this is true, the magisterium has a unique and special office in regard to this truth: it bears an ultimate responsibility and authority to authenticate, to preserve, to develop and hence to condemn and endorse, to accept as well as reject.
3. Until very recently heavy emphasis has been given the custodial role of the magisterium which has projected a highly negative image of its function.
4. The magisterium has a positive role in fostering development and should without prejudice to its custodial function give greater scope to its developmental function. Development, therefore, is not the exclusive preserve of theology.
5. Theologians, on the other hand, having in the main assumed development as their special prerogative, should, without prejudice to the developmental dynamics of theology, also give proper scope to its custodial imperatives.

Since the truth is committed to the community of faith and since all functions in that community are the gift of one and the same Spirit, both the magisterium and theology must respect the exigencies of the other. Their relationships should be characterized by the consciousness that each is called to a work of service. There should be on the part of both a deep spirit of humility and openness and a pervading sense of the mandate to "build up the body of Christ" and of the pauline injunction that no one is to "seek himself but rather Christ in all things."

There should be a sense of mutual need and support rather than a petty hoarding of empires. The spirit of collaboration, so fruitful during the Council, should be extended and deepened until we all "reach perfect manhood, that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ. . . . We are to follow the truth in a spirit of charity and so grow up in everything into a due proportion with Christ, who is our Head" (Eph. 4:13; 15).

Just as the magisterium is stunted if its role is too exclusively custodial, so theology is stunted if its efforts are too exclusively cerebral. We have all complained about the old, narrow concept of purely propositional revelation. Magisterium and theology which do not derive from reverent communion with the Person of Christ, are, then, unworthy of their mandate and of this post conciliar age. Francis de Sales is not wide of the mark when he reminds us all that:

There is no other true knowledge except that which is imparted by the Holy Spirit. And this is given only to the humble.³

JOHN R. QUINN
Auxiliary Bishop of San Diego

³ Sermon for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, n.2.