

## RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR MCSORLEY—I

It is an honor and a pleasure to take part in your discussions. In the last ten years the walls of our studies and classrooms have expanded outwards, so that we find nourishment and stimulation not only from our own theological tradition, but from other traditions East and West.

I belong to a church body which is committed to the catholic traditions of the West, in theology, in liturgy and piety, and even in the matter of structures in the Church. The Lutheran confessions assert this loyalty repeatedly and at length, even to the extent of commenting on the desirability of maintaining traditional episcopal government and discipline, a hope which became impossible of realization for most Lutherans. We are thus committed to a continuing struggle for the gospel, to the realization of the Church of Jesus Christ in the world, and to a continuing quest for the unity of Christ's people.

Nowhere does this quest for unity encounter harder problems than those we face as we discuss the primacy and infallibility of the pope. The theological problems are difficult enough, but are complicated further by sensitivities which grow out of different cultural backgrounds, and perhaps even more by emotional reactions on both sides growing out of more than four centuries of conflict. Catholics are understandably offended by hearing the bishop who is to them the Holy Father described by Protestants as Anti-Christ. Protestants normally spend little time searching the pages of Denzinger for the qualifications and limitations of papal primacy and infallibility and rather more in reflection on the meaning of *Unam sanctam* or the iniquities of Alexander VI or Leo X.

A letter written in reaction to news stories about the most recent agreements between Catholics and Lutherans on papal primacy perhaps articulates the mood of many Protestants on this question: "Never will I bow to the pope in Rome. My only supreme leader is God and the Lord Jesus Christ." Anxieties of this kind are not quieted by articles explaining what Catholics actually teach about the pope; the anxiety level sometimes rises into a suspicion that crypto-Catholics now operate even within the Lutheran Church. Such emotional reactions are not the

prime business of this group; we have quite enough to do with theological problems. But we can never overlook the fact that these reactions exist and must be dealt with before the theological agreements will be taken seriously within the congregations.

Let us inquire first about the theological significance of the Lutheran confessional assertion (*Smalkald Articles* IV, 10) that the papacy is Anti-Christ. This is not merely the abusive language which develops in heated controversy, nor is it language invented by the Reformers. From the end of the eleventh century to the time of the Reformation very many persons, eager for the reform of the Church, had leveled this charge against the bishop of Rome. The Reformers identified with it, not casually or carelessly, but because they were convinced that the proscription of their preaching of justification by grace through faith was a clear indication that Catholic leadership was acting contrary to the apostolic tradition in the Scriptures and therefore against the will of the Lord of the Church. Luther on a number of occasions explains how reluctantly and painfully he, as a loyal son of the Church, had concluded that the pope was acting contrary to the Spirit of Christ.

We should note that, however outrageous or painful we may find this assertion, it is theologically more satisfactory than the attitude of those who merely ignore the pope or treat him, perhaps even with admiration, as a kind of secular prince. The Reformers presuppose that the Catholic Church is the Church of Jesus Christ and that the pope exercises an office at the heart of that Church. Lutherans have never denied that the Catholic Church is the Church of Jesus Christ, nor that the pope is legitimate bishop of Rome with legitimate primatial functions over the churches who choose to be in fellowship with him. The Reformers regarded themselves as members of churches who had been improperly cast out of the fellowship of Western Christendom, and looked forward to a time when a truly ecumenical council would acknowledge the orthodoxy of their teaching and heal the divisions within the Church.

We should note, moreover, that inasmuch as the Lutheran confessions, like any other human document, must be understood historically, Lutherans are not committed to the proposition that the papacy of the twentieth century is Anti-Christ. We are, in fact, rather under obligation to take seriously the possibility that the enemy of God's people may

exercise his wiles in other communities as well, including those looking for leadership to Wittenberg and Geneva, Chicago, St. Louis, or St. Paul. There are, alas, Lutherans so unhistorical in outlook as to insist that loyalty to the confessions means maintaining the view that from the year 1537 until the Parousia the papacy is to be identified as Anti-Christ. How many such Lutherans there are I have no way of knowing. I can only hope that they are few and becoming fewer. We Lutherans taking part in the officially sponsored theological discussions with Roman Catholics in the United States have recorded our conviction that we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in the proclamation and theology of the contemporary Catholic Church.

Professor McSorley's paper makes a number of points which are of importance to the ecumenical discussion of the papacy.

1. The Reformers' rejection of the papacy was conditional. They had grown up in the Catholic Church and wanted to be loyal to it. They found themselves in an awkward position, however. They were convinced that their teaching of justification by grace through faith was scriptural and therefore also Catholic, but were declared heretical by Church authorities who were presumably bound to the same authorities. They showed their understanding of theological priorities by remaining loyal to the Scriptures and reluctantly accepting exclusion from the Catholic Church. Once evicted, they began to re-examine many doctrines, including that of papal authority, in the light of an historical-critical reading of the Scriptures. This led them to insist that the papacy of their time was not based upon a dominical commandment. Many of them were still willing to accept the authority of the pope, as of human law, if only he would grant them the right to teach in accordance with the Scriptures.

2. Most Protestants will be pleased, and some of them also surprised, to learn of the limitations of papal authority and of the necessity of opposing the pope when he commands something contrary to the will of God. This aspect of Catholic teaching is not widely known in Protestant circles, nor have Roman Catholics laid much stress on it. The quotations from Cajetan, Torquemada, and Bellarmine, as well as the letter of the German bishops in 1870 and the reply of Pope Pius IX, help to correct the popular impression that the pope is an absolute monarch and has a completely free hand in the formulation of laws and

doctrines. The citation of Pope Pius IX denying contemporary papal power to remove political authorities from office deserves to be more widely known. Many Protestants continue to assume that the absolutist claim of the bull *Unam sanctam* is one of the arrows in the quiver of the modern papacy.

3. Professor McSorley calls attention to structural and stylistic variations through the centuries in the exercise of episcopal and papal authority. It is well that Protestants too be reminded of these variations, and of the fact that papal authority can be structured and exercised in a number of different ways. For centuries many Christians have noted the contrast between the humility and poverty of Jesus in his ministry and the imperial splendor surrounding the pope. The college of cardinals, the princes of the Church, has seemed hard to reconcile with the ministry of the apostles, as has also the large number of archbishops and bishops holding administrative positions in the Roman Curia. What attracted and impressed many Protestants during the pontificate of Pope John XXIII was precisely the simplicity of his demeanor and the fact that he did not seem to take himself or the trappings of his office too seriously. Pope Paul VI has probably done even more than Pope John did to reduce the pomp and ceremony attending the exercise of the papacy, but has done it so quietly that many people are not even aware of it.

A number of persisting Protestant questions concern the style of papal administration. Does the exercise of papal primacy require such a centralization of power in Rome? The shifts of power following Vatican II give more actual power to diocesan bishops, regional conferences, and the Synod of Bishops, but much yet remains to be done if it is to be convincing. Why should not priests and people of a diocese have more to say about the appointment of the bishop? Why should not episcopal collegiality be accompanied by more sharing of responsibility between bishops, priests, and people, as it indeed has in a few notable dioceses? Why not cut down the size of the administrative apparatus in Rome and decrease the number of bishops and domestic prelates in the Curia? Why not permit the College of Cardinals to disappear, and allow the Synod of Bishops to assume its most significant function, the election of the pope? Why should the Roman administrative style and practice continue to exert so much influence upon the Church at large,

especially in a day when rapid change demands that decisions be made by people who understand local situations? Perhaps the primatial function of the pope as a symbol and maintainer of unity will be both more effectual and more attractive if it is distanced from an entrenched bureaucracy and permitted to operate more pastorally.

All of these questions arise out of a traditional expectation of what the unity of the Church is to be, namely one monolithic ecclesiastical organization, with centralized administration and substantially uniform liturgy, doctrine, and discipline. There is reason today, following Vatican II, to think of any future unity of the Church in different terms, as a fellowship of churches in which ministries and sacraments are mutually recognized, but in which a great diversity of structures, forms of worship and discipline is seen as not only permissible but even desirable. If such a diversified unity should be achieved, many of the above questions will seem like impertinent meddling in the affairs of a sister church, or, at the very best, a kind of fraternal discussion as to the best way for the Church to meet the world.

There is no doubt that many Roman Catholics share this vision of a diversified unity of churches. Whether any significant number of them are placed in posts where important decisions are made is of course another question, and many Protestants will remain sceptical about the prospects of such a unity as long as this is so. The papal homilies in days before Vatican II inviting other Christians to return to the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church are still well remembered. Others have noted the attempts by the Roman Curia, even after Vatican II, to impose Roman discipline upon the Catholic churches of the East. They forget that such attempts to assert authority are no monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church and that they must be dealt with by determined resistance wherever they happen.

4. I believe that Professor McSorley is right in suggesting that the discussion of papal infallibility begin from the question of the infallibility of the Church. Not only Orthodox and Anglicans, but Calvinists and Lutherans as well, affirm the infallibility of the Church, and thus have common ground with Roman Catholics in this discussion. Calvinists speak of the perseverance of the saints, asserting by this their confidence in the faithfulness of God who sustains his elect children. Lutherans speak of one holy Church which continues forever, not as an

affirmation of their optimism about the durability of ecclesiastical institutions, but as an expression of their confidence in God, who calls, gathers, enlightens, and preserves his people.

The difficulty in this discussion, of course, is that the Reformers regard infallibility as something to be attributed primarily to God and only derivatively to the Christian community. God alone is infallible; the Church shares in his infallibility because it is the creation of his Word and is continually preserved and renewed by his presence among his people. After some exposure to strenuously papalist claims in the sixteenth century, the Reformers and their successors have been at pains to insist that no human person, office, institution, or society can properly lay claim to divine qualities. The Church always lives by the mercy and faithfulness of God, and must never forget this.

This difficulty should not make us despair of the possibility of recovering Christian unity. It may be that the emotional temperature on both sides remains so high that the question cannot be resolved in this generation. There are, however, a number of lines of theological research and discussion which offer hopes of greater understanding and increasing agreement.

a. The recognition that there is a hierarchy of dogmas suggests that papal infallibility may not be of the same priority as Trinitarian or Christological dogma, but that it may be of second or third rank in importance. If so, neither Protestant disagreement nor Catholic defense of it need be as intense as they have been in the last century. The Roman Catholic-Lutheran agreements on the role of Peter in the New Testament illustrate how lowered emotional temperatures can nurture growth in understanding.

b. The development of historical critical studies has shown the need for nuancing many traditional historical and dogmatic statements. The distinction between *lex divinum* and *lex humanum* is one such case. If the term *lex divinum* can be used to describe a process of development unfolding over a long period of time, the guidance of the Holy Spirit may be discerned in the process of the development of the papacy, as also in the selection of the biblical canon and in the growth of practice of infant baptism.

Unlike some Protestants whose understanding of the *sola scriptura* has seemed to entail a leap from the early Church to the twentieth

century, Lutherans have acknowledged that many developments in the life of the Church have taken place under the guidance of the Spirit. Their understanding of the need for the reformation and renewal in the Church did not lead them to attempts to re-pristiniate the apostolic Church, but rather to accept everything in the Catholic tradition which was not clearly contrary to the gospel. More radical reformers accused them of remaining stuck fast in medieval error, but they were convinced that there is a kind of principle of incarnation at work in the life of the Church. The gospel assumes the flesh and bone of the historical epoch in which it is proclaimed, just as the Word made flesh was a Galilean Jew of the first century.

It is only fair to add that historical studies together with participation in the ecumenical movement have brought a major part of the Protestant communities to an awareness of the role of tradition in the Church. There is a new appreciation today of the role of creeds, confessions, bishops, patriarchs and councils in the maintenance of unity in the Church.

c. If, as the Orthodox tradition suggests, the unity of the Church is possible on the basis of the first seven ecumenical councils, theological definitions made since that time by Roman Catholic councils or by the pope might be treated as dogmatically binding upon the Roman Catholic communion only, and not upon other Christian communities. This would assume a large measure of agreement not only on Trinitarian and Christological dogma but on such matters as the authority of the Scriptures, the role of tradition in the Church, the mission of the Church, the nature of the ministry, Baptism as a sacrament of initiation, and on the real presence in the Eucharist.

d. If papal infallibility is the way the infallibility of the Church is brought to focus and made explicit in the Roman Catholic Church, and if fellowship with other churches is possible even apart from their acceptance of this specific way of articulating the Church's infallibility, then it need not be seen as an insuperable barrier to the recovery of unity. Inasmuch as this possibility seems an opening to the Orthodox churches, it is at least conceivable that under proper conditions it might be possible for at least some of the churches of the West. Here again one would expect substantial theological agreement in the areas mentioned above and continuing openness in all the churches to the theo-

logical insights of other traditions.

e. If the churches can agree upon an understanding of dogmatic truth which corresponds to that of the Scriptures, a new perspective on the meaning and role of dogmatic statements might be achieved. Such an understanding is already developing in many Christian communities where the study of the Scriptures and reflection on the role of doctrinal language have challenged the too-intellectualistic epistemologies of some traditional theologies. The truth revealed by God in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is recognized as too rich and diverse to be exhausted or even adequately stated from only one theological perspective. The various theologies which have developed in the history of the Church are then seen, not as mutually exclusive, so that in accepting one, we must reject the others, but rather as complementary to each other. In this light even some heresies can be recognized as the one-sided exploitation of a valid insight into the apostolic tradition.

Professor McSorley seems to suggest such an understanding of theology in his distinction between agreement on doctrine definitions and agreement on the realities pointed to by doctrinal statements. His attempt to support this view from Chapter III of *Lumen gentium* seems not persuasive, for this chapter seems more concerned to demonstrate the congruence of the theology of Chapters I and II to that of Vatican I than with any attempt to break new ground in the interpretation of papal infallibility. But Chapters I, II and IV of *Lumen gentium* present a theology more biblical than scholastic and one which offers new perspectives in theological method and the meaning of theological language. This line of thought seems to reach its fullest development in Vatican II in *Dei verbum*, with its suggestions for rethinking the relation of Scripture and tradition and also the religious epistemology which underlies the Church's theology.

f. The suggestion of Professor Mühlen, that all traditional ecclesiologies suffer from an oversimplified model, and that the diversity of the gifts of the Spirit needs to be taken more seriously, impresses this reader, as it did Professor McSorley, as worth pursuing. The monocratic pattern may be satisfactory for the Old Testament community, but the people who experience the presence and power of the Spirit are constantly receiving impulses and gifts that refuse to be contained in monocratic categories. Encounter with the pneumatological ecclesiology of



Orthodoxy as well as the new appreciation of the charisms of the Spirit in our day, may enable us to appreciate the broad range of experience found within the Church of Jesus Christ and also to find some theological language to give adequate expression to it.

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