

## PAUL OR APOLLOS?\*

The tensions between faith, theology and obedience have exploded periodically since the earliest days of the Church. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul tried to control the widening gap between the group that "belonged to Apollos" and the group that "belonged to Paul" (I Cor. 1:10-3.23). In succeeding centuries the same conflict has arisen between followers of different masters or schools of theology.

St. Thomas Aquinas had stated in his day that the weakest argument in theology is the argument from authority — unless it is the authority of God. But this did not prevent many a professor from clinching a theological argument by quoting Aquinas, nor does it prevent some priests today from blindly accepting doctrines, theories and opinions simply on the basis of the notoriety or popularity of a particular author. Perhaps the tendency stems from their seminary days, when they felt secure in taking the word of a professor, who surely should have known more about the subject than they did.

Since the close of Vatican II, theologians have been given a great deal of publicity, with the result that some of them have attracted a large number of followers. At the same time it has become increasingly evident that these authoritative theologians do not agree among themselves and some of them have been accused of rejecting official Church teaching.

Now, it should come as no surprise that there is pluralism in theology or that there are "schools" of theology. The mysteries of faith are not problems to be solved by a theologian, but they are truths to be believed by faith in God revealing, and some of them defy comprehension by the human intellect. Nevertheless, each theologian who attempts to interpret and defend the mysteries of faith will do so according to his own theological method. Moreover, in the field of moral theology there may be universal agreement on the principles of morality

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\* *The Priest*, Sept. 1972.

but a divergence of conclusions when those principles are applied to the existential order of particular cases and circumstances. We have therefore always admitted the difficulty of precision as we get farther away from principles and closer to particulars. We have also always admitted to certain "open questions" in theology, meaning that as yet we have no definitive teaching on a given question. The rule of behavior here has been to be tolerant of other views even as we defend our own.

But when we come to the matter of the rejection of doctrines proposed by the Church for belief, we are faced with quite another and more serious problem. How "free" can a theologian be in expressing his opinion about the dogmas of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the nature of the Eucharist, etc.? The answer to this question involves another: What is the function of a theologian?

In his address to the International Congress of Theology in 1966, Pope Paul VI stated that the function of theology is "to bring to the knowledge of the Christian community, and particularly of the magisterium, the fruits of its research so that, through the doctrine taught by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, they become a light for all the Christian people." And Father Yves Congar has noted: "It is in effect utterly impossible for theology to fulfill its proper function if it is denied the possibility of trials, hypotheses, questions and solutions which are put in circulation, not to impose them as things defined and definitive, but to make them undergo the test of criticism and enjoy . . . the cooperation of the thinking and working world . . . As Benedict XV declared to Father Ledochowski: 'In matters which are not Revelation, we must allow liberty of discussion' " (The History of Theology, p. 273).

So much for the function of the theologian; but what about his teaching authority? Here we have a clear statement from Vatican II in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*: The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit" (n. 10).

Therefore, the criterion of orthodox doctrine is the magisterium of the Church, as Father Congar has stated so succinctly: "Theology has for its rule a datum proposed by the ecclesiastical magisterium, just as philosophy has for its rule the datum of natural knowledge. And it is well established that the first step of the theologian is an act of submission to this datum and magisterium" (op. cit. p. 258).

What this means, then, is that the theologian has an obligation to confine his theologizing between the boundaries of faith in Revelation and obedience to the magisterium of the Church in whose name he theologizes. He must strive to be at once a son of the Church and a servant of the Gospel.

**JORDAN AUMANN, O.P.**

### EPISCOPAL ORDINATION ANNIVERSARIES

Let us pray for our bishops on the occasion of their ordination anniversaries.

Most Rev. Alberto van Overbeke, CICM  
December 1, 1969

Most Rev. Arnulfo S. Arcilla, D.D.  
December 12, 1959