

MARGINAL NOTES ON THE MAGISTERIUM

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I. CRISIS OF THE MAGISTERIUM

Curatory readings of articles and news on ecclesiastical matters these past years reveal unmistakably the existence of a crisis of faith in the teaching authority of the Church. Members of the faithful are denying or doubting or outrightly ignoring both the teaching authority of the Pope and of the Bishops. Some who admit the teaching authority cast a cloud of doubt on the validity or obligatory power of papal doctrinal interventions.

It is in the light of this event that we should understand and find the reason why, especially, during these past eighteen years, the most emphatic and most discussed pronouncements of the Pope have been on the magisterium or the doctrinal authority of the Church. From the "Humani Generis" of 1950, the discourse to the Faculty Members and Student Body of the Gregorian University on the occasion of its IVth Centenary last 1953, the "Si Diligis" address to the Episcopate of May 31, 1954, the October 1, 1965 address to the Theologians attending the International Congress on the Theology of Second Vatican Council, the resounding profession of Faith of the "Credo of the People of God", to the recent "Humanae Vitae", the emphasis has always been "by the will of Jesus Christ, the immediate and universal norm of this unfailing truth—revelation—can be found solely in the authentic magisterium of the Church whose task is to safeguard faithfully and to explain infallibly the deposit of faith".¹

¹ *I Vatican Council, sess. III, ch. 4; D.B. 1798.*

This crisis of faith in the magisterium should be set in a wider perspective because no one factor can adequately explain the emergence of this present phenomenon.

Vatican II

Paradoxically Vatican II is partly responsible in giving rise to this crisis. The doctrinal development that took place at the Vatican Council was a surprise and even a shock to many. The new presentations, the new emphasis and modifications introduced by Vatican II inevitably raised many problems and, unfortunately, very few clear answers. No matter how much theologians explain that there was no real substantial change but merely a homogeneous development, that there was no repudiation of traditional positions but merely a new presentation, couched in more or less contemporary terms, doubts continue to linger in the minds of the faithful. And these doubts are directed on the magisterium.

Furthermore, the doctrinal questions which appeared in greater relief during the Vatican II are still being studied and solutions are not yet available. Opinions and theories are being favorably disseminated by the mass media. Conflicting answers are being offered to the faithful. And the sad result is confusion. Indeed, the voice of the Church has never been silent; but it is drowned in the sea of pronouncements from some theologians. Traditionally the Church allows opinion to mature before expressing approval or condemnation of theological speculations. And there is the rub of it. The Church probably will not be able to give the final verdicts on the theology arising from the Second Vatican Council much before the end of the century. The deeper meaning of the Council's teaching will appear only after full study of what preceded the promulgation of the Council's decrees. Theologians of tomorrow will know more about the council than those who took part was the observation of Cardinal Heenan. Meanwhile, at this stage, people are impatient and are waiting for the definitive answer. The prudence of the Church is interpreted as doubt, weakness and insecurity resulting to the discredit of the magisterium.

Critical Spirit of Our Times

Our age is characterized by two inter-related qualities: a *critical spirit* and *prejudice against authority*. These are responsible in a large measure in precipitating the crisis in the magisterium.

The man of today wants to see with his own eyes how matters stand: to obey, he must be convinced of the justice of what is told him. He does not accept anything imposed on him by authority. First he must evaluate the validity of the motives for a decision before he accepts. In our day we enter into a similar situation, because we all are inevitably affected by our environments and ethos. Consequently, it is not surprising that such attitudes be found among us even in regard to the teaching authority of the Church.

Differences in Cultural Environments

The Church embraces people belonging to different cultural environments. Now, the cultural environment influences the thoughts of men and their understanding of values. It is then inevitable that in the expression of the divine message, different pre-suppositions can be found. This phenomenon creates a situation where Catholics speak about an identical reality in different languages and concepts. Each group tends to suspect the other, while at the same time convinced that its own way of understanding and speaking about Faith is the **ONLY** and **VALID** approach.

Accordingly, it is said, since the ecclesiastical magisterium expresses itself in a way that is close to one particular theological tradition, others, belonging to another tradition, usually suspect partiality on the part of the magisterium.

The net result of all this is the weakening of the magisterium from the part of those who have to accept it. Rationalizations follow. Few Catholics really publicly refuse to acknowledge the authority of the Pope. But then they try to explain it away. The custom is to explain away his words on the grounds that they are not really authentic; living in a closed world, he is misinformed by the advisers who surround him. His frequent complaints against distortion of doctrine are attributed to failing health. The Pope was reported to have wept at a public audience when referring to the disloyalty of some who spoke in the name of the Church. This

was taken as proof that the Pope was not yet recovered from his operation. The press began hinting that Paul's resignation was indeed imminent.

The purpose of this article is very simple. This crisis of faith in the magisterium has not been helped by so much talk and confusing subtleties. Much muddy thinking exists, much confusion due to the admixture of what should be held as sacred and immutable with what this or that particular theologian has to say about it. It is time that we sit down and start drawing attention to the recollection of some basic facts on this topic. This is what we intend to do.

II. THE MAGISTERIUM IN THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

"The eternal Father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe, and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life; and when they had fallen in Adam, he did not abandon them, but at all times held out to them the means of salvation, bestowed in consideration of Christ, the Redeemer, 'who is the image of the invisible God, the first born of every creature and predestined before time began to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren' (Rm. 8:29)."²

This simple statement synthesizes a whole array of particular statements that can be made about the mystery of the Church. After the Fall, the return to God and the possibility of sharing in His riches would be through the Incarnate Son: "When God sent his son into the world, it was not to reject the world, but so that the world might find salvation through him."³ Faith is the fundamental requirement on the part of man in order to obtain that saving union with Christ. As a responsible being, an image of God in his own right, man must personally acknowledge the significance and the *efficacy* of the mission of the Son. He must believe that God re-establishes in Christ man's possibility of knowing and loving the three divine Persons.

² *Lumen Gentium*, n. 2.

³ *Jn*, 3:17.

Faith in the redemptive mission of the Incarnate Word and common-ship in Christ reveals another essential aspect of the salvific faith: its *communal* aspect. God reveals and hence communicates Himself in and through the historical Christ, the Incarnate Word. Every man, therefore, must come into living and personal contact with the Christ of history; and this takes place by coming into contact with and all sharing in the faith of that community to which was communicated once and for all and perfectly God's revelation in Christ, and which was sent to mediate that saving Word to all men. The imperative reason again is the fact that the life-giving divine Word has taken to himself a body and through it mediates his saving action.

This community, this body of Christ called together and living by faith in the Word, serves to continue the very mission of Christ, i.e. to mediate this saving Word to all men. It is the visible manifestation in the world of men's union with God and consequent union among themselves; and at the same time the means through which God achieves this communion.¹

Sharing the same mission with Christ, the Church must necessarily share in the same functions or offices of Christ. What are the duties which Christ had to assume in order to fulfill his mission? He was sent to bring about salvation of the world discharging simultaneously the responsibilities of a *priest*,² of a *king*,³ and of a *prophet*.⁴ If the Church has the identical mission of Christ, it is imperative that she share in these functions also.

That was what Christ had done. The whole community participated in the threefold prerogatives of Christ, establishing a structure more fundamental than the division of members into clergy and laity. But this distribution of the functions takes on a variety of forms in harmony with the variety of functions of those who belong to the visible structure of the Church, which is hierarchic.

¹ cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1.

² *Heb.* 2:17, 3:1, 4:14-15, 6:20.

³ *Mt.* 2:2, 21:5, 27:11; *Jn.* 12:13, 18:37; *Lc.* 23:2; *Acts* 17:7.

⁴ *Lc.* 4:17-22; *Mt.* 13:57; *Jn.* 6:14.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, chap. 2.

Just as we can distinguish the priesthood of the laity from the ministerial priesthood, so likewise we must distinguish the prophetic role of the laity from the *normative*, stable and authoritative prophetic role of the hierarchy. This one is the perennial, authentic, infallible teaching office committed to the Apostles by Christ, and now possessed by their legitimate successors, the college of bishops in union with the pope. This *magisterium* or doctrinal authority is truly a ministry, a service, to and within the community for the faithful transmission and preservation of the revelation.

So it is in this context of the mystery of the Church that we must seek to understand the real meaning and purpose of the authentic and infallible ministry of the Word, or *Magisterium*.

The first thing then we must note is that the Magisterium is not *above* the Word of God, but is at the *service* of that Word. The Word of God is the origin and the foundation of the Church. In fact, it must be acknowledged to have "a force and power so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life."⁹ Nothing and no one can take its place. The very hierarchical magisterium "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 in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit; it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed".¹⁰

The second thing is that the hierarchical magisterium is not a *natural* thing in its essence. It is not a natural fact, imposed by the need that the Church must be an authority on doctrine for the sake of order and unity. It is this, but this is not the prime consideration in its mysterious context. It is, rather a supernatural fact, freely willed by Christ who gave Peter as head of the Apostolic College, the command to confirm his "brethren" in the faith, that is, the other Apostles and, in and with them, all the faithful;¹¹ and invited the other Apostles to preach the Gospel to all the people. That is why we believe

⁹ *Dei Verbum*, n. 21.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, n. 10.

¹¹ cf. *Lc.* 22, 32.

that the hierarchical magisterium is a dogma of faith, which in essence means that Christ constituted the Pope, and the Bishops united with the Pope, as teachers of its faith, its guardians, its interpreters. And He promised them the special assistance of the Holy Spirit so that they do not fall into error when they propose for belief the truths contained in revelation.

The third thing to be noted is that the magisterium is not a *scientific* magisterium but a magisterium of *authority*. Most of the criticism against the "Humanae Vitae" seem to have lost sight of this perspective of the teaching authority of the Church. The critics expended too much effort analysing the justifying reasons for the decision taken by the Pope. Feeling dissatisfied with it, they conclude that ergo the decision is not binding at all! But they do not constitute the essential consideration of the Encyclical, or of the teaching authority of the Pope for that matter. The essential thing is that the Pope in this particular Encyclical is laying down a moral rule. The Pope, as the supreme doctor of faith, is authentically interpreting the divine law and teaching that its observance is binding "on all the faithful". In the light of the divine assistance which he possesses and which we believe on faith, the Pope is declaring, teaching that such moral rule is true and good. It is binding, not by reason of the justifications that might be given to support it, but primarily by reason of the divine authority of the Vicar of Christ, who commands through him. "He who hears you, hears Me." The justifying arguments certainly have their own meaning and role in this magisterium of authority; their value help to shape the papal decisions and interventions. But, the real foundation and reason for our obedience will not be because we see and we are convinced of these reasons or arguments but because it is an act of the Pope's supreme teaching authority backed up by the divine assistance of the Person Whom he represents, Jesus Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body.

III. THE MAGISTERIUM AND THE PROPHETICAL ROLE OF THE FAITHFUL

Some Catholics appeal against the decisions of the magisterium to the fact that the teaching or prophetic function in the Church does not belong only to the hierarchy but to all the People of God, as they

share in the teaching or prophetic function of Christ. This fact did not escape the attention of Pope Paul VI.

Speaking on the Church's magisterium last January, 1967, he said:

"A few who are actually within the Church today, several who are more or less faithful to it and many who surround it but are strangers, look with reservations and diffidence on the magisterium of the Church. Some would like to recognize in this magisterium more than anything else the task of confirming the 'infallible belief of the communion of the faithful'. Others — followers of doctrines which deny the Church's magisterium — would recognize in each of the faithful the capacity for interpreting Sacred Scripture freely according to their own intuition, which is all too easily assigned claim of inspiration".¹²

Again last March 18, 1967, during a general audience on the feast of the Chair of Peter, he laments:

"...unfortunately that nowadays certain trends of thought which still are described Catholic, attempt to attribute a priority in the normative formulation of the truth of the faith to faithful above the teaching function of the episcopacy and the Roman pontificate, contrary to the scriptural teaching and to the doctrine of the Church, which was openly confirmed in the recent council".¹³

The prophetic role of the faithful is undoubtedly an explicit teaching of Vatican II.

"The holy People of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office. It spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give honour to His name (cf. *Heb.* 13:5). The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. *Jn.* 2:20, 27), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity' it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals..."¹⁴.

¹² *Filipinas*, February 4, 1967, p. 2.

¹³ *Filipinas*, March 18, 1967, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 12.

But the Council was also careful to note immediately that alongside this general prophetic role of the faithful exists the hierarchical, normative, definitive and stable magisterium:

"For by this sense of the faith which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, God's People accepts not the word of men, but the very Word of God (cf. *I Th.* 2:13). It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. *Jude* 3), penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights, and applies it more thoroughly to life. *All this it does under the lead of a sacred teaching authority to which it loyally defers*".¹⁵

Consequently, although the whole Church — pastors and faithful — enjoy the gift of prophecy, there are also in the Church, the Pope and the Bishops who "have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth".¹⁶ Such a charism belongs only to them. In virtue of this charism the episcopal hierarchy must (1) *ensure that the doctrine of the faith comes to the faithful from Christ and the Apostles*, thus making possible that the community of the faithful may truly live 'upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets: Christ Jesus Himself being the corner-stone'¹⁷. (2) *it must judge the conformity with the deposit of faith of developments, expressions and applications that come to this doctrine through being lived, pondered and shown forth by the faithful*. To form and to guide the doctrinal and practical life of the faithful are functions of the hierarchical magisterium. This is one point we must not forget about the Church: community life in it is not purely a practical matter but is a life in unity of faith and based on that very unity: so that her public authority takes the form of a magisterium, as well as of jurisdiction or government.

There is no doubt that this hierarchical prophetic role is for the benefit of the faithful; it is an office of service inasmuch as it sees to it that the People of God do not fall into errors of faith. It is for the faithful, but it is also given ONLY to the hierarchy. It is for this reason that *Dei Verbum* concludes: "the office of interpreting authentically the

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, also n. 37.

¹⁶ *Dei Verbum*, n. 8.

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:20.

Word of God written or handed down is entrusted only to the living Teaching Authority in the Church, whose authority is exercised in the Name of Christ".¹⁸

The Sensus Fidei and the Magisterium

This same situation appears in the more concrete case of the *sensus fidei* or what *Lumen Gentium*¹⁹ calls the supernatural sense of the faith.

The right view of this supernatural sense is that it is *ordered to the apostolic hierarchy*. The body of the faithful, the Church believing and loving, has the help of the Holy Spirit to be faithful people, that is to remain firm in faith. But this faith, according to the divine economy, was brought to this people by the teaching of its hierarchs. Consequently, it is by necessity ordered to the apostolic hierarchy, the guardian of tradition in its reality and formation. Obedience and submission to the appointed organs of tradition handed down from Christ and the Apostles appears then as an essential element of the *sensus fidei*.

This right orientation, this reference and submission to the magisterium is so essential indeed to the supernatural sense of faith of the faithful that without such orientation it would not even be infallible. There are two cases in which we say that the body of faithful is infallible. The *first case* is when it listens to the teaching Church and thus partakes of the *teaching Church's* infallibility. In this particular case the Holy Spirit makes the hierarchy infallible, and the hierarchy, by subjecting the faithful to itself communicates the benefits of *its* infallibility to the body of faithful. The *second case* is when, through the Holy Spirit also, the body of faithful cannot err in the living possession of that faith. But here again, that faith necessarily relates them to the magisterium as its generative cause. So no matter how you view it, the *sensus fidei* always implies organic reference and submission to the magisterium.²⁰

The *sensus fidelium* then must never be viewed independently of the magisterium, and much less against it. History tells us what wide-

¹⁸ N. 10.

¹⁹ N. 12.

²⁰ Yves M.J. Congar, O.P., *Lay People in the Church*, translated by Donald Altwaters, Newman Press: Maryland, 1965, Part II, Chap. 6, pp. 290-91.

spread failures in faith happen in the Christian people when this occur. England and the Scandinavian countries, superstitious devotions are only some of the vivid lessons of history.

And if these are not yet sufficient, compare the *sensus fidei* with the ordinary magisterium of the Church.²¹

The *sensus fidei* is not a teaching authority in the proper sense of the word. It is an experimental persuasion on a certain truth rooted in the theological virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Although this may be found in *all* the faithful and thereby constitutes a valid criterion for discerning a revealed truth, nevertheless, it is not a doctrinal definition in itself. A teaching of the *hierarchical ordinary magisterium* however is not a simple experimental persuasion, but a real magisterial or teaching act of the truth of doctrine. When this magisterium is universal and definitive, it is not a simple criterion of a possible definition, but is automatically a definition of faith.

The *sensus fidei* is obtained sufficiently in the state of grace or at least in the theological faith. While the *hierarchical ordinary magisterium* is found among those who have the episcopal succession, although they might not be in the state of grace.

Furthermore, a necessary distinction must be made between a universal agreement of the faithful on an *already* defined doctrine by the solemn or ordinary magisterium, and the same universal agreement on a *not yet defined* doctrine of faith and moral. The first one is definitely infallible; while the second is not yet infallible, but simply constitutes a clear criterion by which we may know that such a doctrine can be defined by the legitimate doctrinal authority of the Church.

From the foregoing considerations we can easily find our bearing on this delicate matter. The prophetic role of the laity does not exclude the hierarchical magisterium; it presupposes it and is its norm and guide. The hierarchical magisterium is not an emanation from the community; it comes directly from the Head of the Body, Christ.

²¹ Cf. F. Marin-Sola, O.P., *La Evolución Homogénea del Dogma Católico*, B.A.C., 1952, pp. 408-19.

However, both are ordained for the 'common good of that Body'. The obvious conclusion which can be drawn from this is that there must be a "dialogue" of some sort between the faithful and the hierarchy. There must be a cooperation between the pastors and the faithful, under the action of the Spirit whose work is precisely this — to lead the Church "to all truth".

It is not very unlikely to say that the root cause of the uneasiness of some Catholics in regard to the teachings of the Church can be due to the insufficient vital exchange between the Teaching Church and the Church Taught. It is along this line that the effort of the Church should be emphasized in this post-conciliar period.

(to be continued)

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