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PAUL O'LEARY

Authority to Proclaim the Word of God, and the Consent of the Church

In one way or another, the relationship between the consent of the faithful and the authoritative proclamation of the Word of God has exercised the minds of Christians for a very long time. It is not a question which once dealt with can be put aside by the repetition of previous responses. There must be a continuous quest for a deeper understanding in a new context. Different Churches have already faced the question in different ways at different times. The Roman Catholic Church dealt with this problem when faced with the challenge posed by the probings of the Reformers, but the responses of the sixteenth century were not simply invoked by the first Vatican Council, in response to the challenge of Gallicanism.

The problem must be considered by the Churches in a new context today, since it is framed by a new set of pre-occupations, in a much wider context. Primarily, the new context of the question is the ecumenical thrust of our theology. The ecumenical factor in considering a question such as the authority to proclaim the Word of God does not simply consist in outlining the position of other Churches. It is, rather, an acceptance of the challenge to one's own position inherent in the way other traditions have posed the question.

The World Council of Churches has given some consideration to this question and it is clear that the different traditions have much in common in the way in which they see the problem posed in our time. The Commission on Faith and Order, at Accra, underlined some of the driving forces posing the problem in new contexts in contemporary society. It recognises a problem of authority in the Churches, but it points out that this cannot be isolated from a world wide crisis in

authority. It highlights the hermeneutical dimension involved in reading and hearing authoritative statements, both from the point of view of history and that of cultural pluralism. It points to the questions that are posed by recent philosophical investigations of language, and it stresses the close ties that must exist between the proclamation of truth and praxis¹. These background questions will not be treated specifically in this article, but they do form part of the wider context in which the question is posed today, in all the Churches.

Virtually all Christian Churches admit the necessity of authoritative teaching, if the Gospel is to be proclaimed effectively in each age. Another Faith and Order paper, this time presented at Louvain, pointed out that apostolicity draws attention «to the permanent responsibility of the Church to transmit the living testimony of the apostles. This is the role of ministries in the various forms they have taken since the beginnings of the Church»². There is general acceptance that the ministers of the Church have a role in teaching, but the different understandings of ministry and how it functions in teaching authoritatively is a major ecumenical question³.

Among the major Churches, then, there is a measure of agreement on the need for an authoritative proclamation of the Gospel, through their various ministries. There is too, in all the Churches, a strand of thought which emphasises the place of the faithful in teaching. This can have very different expressions, some of which would seem to effectively deny any real place to a ministry of truth.

This article takes as its starting point the position of Alexis Stepanovitch Xomjakov, a truly seminal Orthodox thinker of the last century. Despite the fact that he did not write a great deal of theology and the fact that he was to some extent marginal to the general trend of Orthodox theology in the last century, he has had a most profound influence on Orthodox thinking, especially on the question of teaching in the Church. His influence on people like Serge Bulgakov and Paul Evdokimov was very significant.

The basis of Xomjakov's position on teaching in the Church is his conviction that truth in the Church is so intimately bound up with the mutual love of the brethren, that it can never be separated from love.

¹ Faith and Order Commission, Accra, 1974, n. 71, pp. 92–93.

² Faith and Order Commission, Louvain, 1971, n. 59, p. 139.

³ Faith and Order n. 71, p. 83.

Since mutual love belongs to the whole Church, so too faith belongs to the whole Church and cannot be, in any way, the preserve of a section of the Church. Thus it is the whole Church which is the guardian of the whole truth⁴. Hence, he denies any distinction whatever between a teaching Church and a learning Church. There can be no teaching Church apart from the whole Church⁵.

Xomjakov, however, does not exclude all teaching function from the hierarchy. The ministers of the Church are particularly charged with the service of the Word of God⁶. It is especially when he considers ecumenical councils that he treats of a special teaching function for the bishops. It is the right and honour of bishops to declare dogmatic decisions when gathered in council. Their decisions are a testimony of the faith of the Church. He will not admit the possibility of the unanimity of bishops being in error⁷. However, the problem remains of judging councils in which there is not unanimity and the more difficult question of discerning which councils are in fact ecumenical. He answers that question by a very strong affirmation that the ultimate judge of each council is the whole Church. It is the whole Church which judges, by its reception or non reception, whether a teaching is in conformity with the faith of the whole Church. An ecumenical council, or any teaching, has no ultimate authority until it has been accepted by the whole Church united in mutual love. This is the way in which he explains the rejection of the council of Florence. Those who exercised any special teaching function in the Church remain subject to the judgment of the Church in the exercise of that function⁸. He sees all teaching as a rational logical expression which has no vitality or authority unless it is given life by being accepted by the inner life principle of the Church, the mutual love of the faithful⁹. The rationalism of the western Churches is their separation of teaching from mutual love.

Clearly, this position has something in common with the Gallican position. It must not be forgotten that Xomjakov and the Gallicans

⁴ A. S. KHOMIAKOV (sic), *L'Eglise latine et le Protestantisme au point de vue de l'Eglise d'Orient* (Lausanne et Vevey, 1872), p. 267.

⁵ Ibid. p. 48.

⁶ Ibid. p. 54, note 1.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 148–152, 283 note 1, 285.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 64, 173.

⁹ Ibid. p. 100.

were of the same epoch. But Xomjakov's position is in fact much more explicitly based on a trinitarian theology than that of the Gallicans, as will be seen in a moment.

Whatever the roots of these positions, the response of the first Vatican Council to the Gallican position is relevant to Xomjakov's position. One advantage of starting from the reflection on the position of an Orthodox thinker is that it points to the fact that «*ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae*» is not just a Roman Catholic pre-occupation. It is relevant to Xomjakov's position. Nor is it simply relevant to the infallibility of the Pope. Vatican I simply intended to treat of one aspect of the infallibility that Christ willed for his Church (even if it has often been interpreted as if it were the totality of the infallibility of the Church). There can be no doubt that when *Lumen Gentium* in number 22 declares that the college of bishops has full and supreme authority over the universal Church, it intends that this be interpreted, in matters of teaching, as bearing that authority characterised by Vatican I as being «*ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae*».

The import of that teaching reaches beyond the confines of the Roman Catholic Church, since it poses a question to every Church which accepts a teaching ministry. It asks whether the authoritative character of that teaching comes from its acceptance by the faithful. Nor is it a problem simply for Churches which have an episcopal structure. The implications of the Faith and Order reports are clear. The reformed Churches too see the need for authoritative teaching, which is not simply the proclamation of the scriptural Word of God. Thus, this problem, as well as that of the sacraments continues to make the question of ministry in the Church one of the most urgent ecumenical tasks.

It must not be thought that the declarations of Vatican I and Vatican II have terminated the question of Roman Catholics. Vatican I dealt with a very specific problem posed by Gallicanism. But the question is much wider, involving the whole complex question of the relationship between the faith of the Church and ministry. The question is now posed in a very different ecclesial situation by the ecumenical thrust of our theology. Further, it will be seen, that another ecclesial viewpoint, namely the development of the theology of the local Church, in a eucharistic setting has posed the question in a new way, and marks an important step forward.

There is also, one feels, another sense in which the context of the

problem must be widened. The Faith and Order study on Catholicity and Apostolicity has rightly drawn attention to the Christological and pneumatological dimensions of these concepts¹⁰. The way in which one considers authority and authoritative teaching in the Church, often has hidden Christological and pneumatological presuppositions. Our ecclesiologies have to strive to be both Christological and pneumatological and it is often because this balance has not been achieved that our views on the relationship of faith and teaching are so one sided. The Christological dimension of ecclesiology tends to emphasise the Church as incarnated in the world, in the society of men, with a consequent emphasis on history, on order, on authority and structure. The pneumatological dimension expresses the interpersonal and relational aspects of the Church, with a consequent stress on the charismatic gifts, on freedom and on the inner realities of love and unity and on the fulness of God's Kingdom of which the interior gifts are an anticipation. The structural charisms emphasised in the Christological aspect are realities of this world and of the Church as pilgrim.

Both aspects must be present in a theology of the Church. The difficulties that arise in a view of teaching in the Church can stem from an exclusive or quasi-exclusive concern with one or other aspect. Roman Catholic theology of the Church in recent centuries has had a very marked Christological emphasis and consequently it has not focussed sufficiently on the inner realities of faith and love. It is not that faith and love have not been very important in Catholic theology, but that faith and love have not been adequately seen as constitutive of the Church. So much of the thrust of Roman Catholic reflection has been on the level of ministry and structure that the pneumatological element has been neglected.

On the other hand, the theology of Xomjakov, with its almost exclusive emphasis on the inner reality of the Church seems to neglect the structural and institutional aspects. It is interesting that Xomjakov's ecclesiology totally neglects eschatology and this is surely because his view of the Church so emphasises the inner realities of love and freedom that one is left with a description of the fulness of the Kingdom rather than a theology of the pilgrim Church. One wonders also if the reformation with its emphasis on freedom and the appeal to the direct

¹⁰ Faith and Order n. 59, p. 135.

inspiration of the believer encountering the Word of God, together with a certain de-emphasis on the structures of the Church, did not neglect the Christological aspect of the Church and concern itself too exclusively with the pneumatological.

All the Churches must seek an ecclesiology which is both Christological and pneumatological. The Faith and Order report on Catholicity and Apostolicity points the way towards a solution. «The one and the same Jesus Christ is present to the circle of believers by the gift of the Holy Spirit Who gives life to the tradition of the Church in the communion of faith and the sacraments and, at the same time, in the community which these believers together constitute»¹¹. The first element of that statement is surely the key to an ecclesiology which does not neglect or overemphasise either Christ or the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that Christ dwells in the Church. Thus, as the text says succinctly, it is the Holy Spirit who gives life to the Church as a visible reality in the world, expressing and realising itself in faith and sacrament, and at the same time the Spirit makes the Church to be a communion in the Body of the Lord.

The same point has been stated in a different way by an Orthodox theologian, Boris Bobrinskoy, when he pointed out that the eucharist can never be simply anamnesis, reciting the narrative of what God has done for us in Christ, it is also epicletic, calling on God to give his Spirit so that Christ may be present here and now¹². The Church can never be simply institution or simply communion. The institutional realities of Word and Sacrament are at once the expression and the realisation of the communion of the faithful, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The real roots of Xomjakov's position are to be found in a failure to grant that the Spirit is given by the Lord Jesus, but is a *Patre solo*. The relationship between Christ and the Spirit in one's theology of the Church is vital in a discussion on teaching and the faith of the Church, expressions of the Christological and pneumatological.

The debate on the theology of reception, which has taken place in recent years has widened the context of the debate in another way, in that it pre-supposes an ecclesiology which is very much centered on the

¹¹ Ibid. p. 145.

¹² Boris BOBRINSKOY, *Le Saint-Esprit dans la Liturgie*, in: *Studia Liturgica* 1 (1962), pp. 52 and 57.

local Church¹³. In this perspective the universal Church is not seen as the sum of the local Churches. Rather the universal Church finds its realisation in the local Church grouped around the bishop as he presides at the eucharist. The universal Church finds its realisation there because the Church has no other realisation except in the local Church. There is no other way of becoming a member of the Church which is universal except through the sacraments celebrated in the local Church, in which we have first heard the fulness of the gospel proclaimed. Thus, as Père Congar says, «au point de vue des biens spirituels du salut, chaque communauté locale groupée autour de son évêque est l'Eglise de Dieu pour autant qu'elle est (ici ou là)»¹⁴. To speak in terms of biens spirituels de l'Eglise is not a real limitation of the truth that the local Church is the Church of Christ. Biens spirituels encompass the sacraments by which we enter into the saving mystery of Christ and the full proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus by which we are led to faith. There is no other way in which the Church can lead us to Christ and there is no other way of hearing the Word and celebrating the presence of the Lord except within the local Church.

It is within the framework of the local Church and the communion of local Churches that reception took place in the early Church. In the history of the Church we see many examples of the reception of synods of particular Churches. The creeds and the teachings of local synods were received by other Churches and thus attained a universal significance. Such reception was not necessarily a formal one. It was sometimes simply a de facto recognition of a synodal formula as a true expression of the faith of the Church¹⁵. A particularly striking example is the Council of Orange, held in 529 AD which was attended by only fourteen bishops, but whose doctrine on grace was received by all the Churches and thus acquired a universal significance. Another striking and important example is the reception of the canon of Scripture. It is especially interesting that its reception was an informal reality before it

¹³ YVES CONGAR O.P., *La Communion des Eglises*, in: *L'Episcopat et l'Eglise universelle*, edited Y. Congar and B. D. Dupuy. Paris 1962. – Alois Grillmeier S.J., *Konzil und Rezeption. Theologie und Philosophie* 45 (1970) 321–452. – Y. Congar, *La «réception» comme réalité ecclésiologique. Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 56 (1972) 369–403.

¹⁴ Y. CONGAR, *La communion des Eglises*, p. 252.

¹⁵ A. GRILLMEIER, *op. cit.* pp. 332–334.

was given a definite synodal expression at the Roman Synod of 382 AD¹⁶.

In a theology of the Church focussed on the local Church, the bishop has a very important role in the reception of teaching. An ecclesiology of the local Church, to achieve a universal dimension must speak of a communion of Churches. This communion is expressed and realised in the common celebration of the one eucharist. (The particular difficulties raised by Churches with a presbyteral structure must be left aside here. Suffice it to say that it is fairly generally accepted that the one who presides at the eucharist has a special role in teaching.) At the eucharist the Church is most visible, both in the proclamation of the faith and in the breaking of the bread. The bishop as president of the assembly has a special function both in the sacrament and in the proclamation of the Word. It is because of this presidency that the bishop has a very important role in the reception of teaching. The bishop can stand for his Church. He represents his Church. Thus communion between local Churches is expressed by mention of their bishops in the eucharist. What is intended is a communion of Churches, not just a communion of bishops.

The position of the bishop in the reception of teaching can be seen when the universal dimension is considered. The universal Church is not a gigantic local Church for which the bishop of Rome can speak as a kind of super-bishop. Thus the reception of ecumenical councils must also be seen within the context of the local Church. The decrees of a council are received in their acceptance by the bishops of the local Churches, not as individuals but as presidents acting in the name of their Churches¹⁷. The two Councils of the Vatican are unique in that virtually the whole episcopate of the Roman Catholic Church attended them. But, of course, at Vatican I a sizable minority of bishops absented themselves from the final vote on the decree on infallibility. They subsequently accepted this decision because it had been received by the whole assembly of the Catholic Church in the signature of the bishops attending the Council.

Reception of teaching must be by the local Church and the local Church has no other way of expressing its acceptance except through

¹⁶ Y. Congar, *La «réception»*, pp. 380–381.

¹⁷ Nicolas AFANASSIEFF, *Le Concile dans la théologie russe*, *Irénikon* 35 (1962) 328.

the bishop. The idea of reception by the faithful (in the strict sense of reception) is totally at variance with the ancient and modern practice of the Church¹⁸.

Although reception of the teaching of ecumenical councils (and other authoritative teaching) is exercised by the local Church in the person of its bishop, as president of the eucharistic assembly, the decisions of councils and all authoritative teaching cannot be abstracted from the faith of the whole Church. Ecumenical councils and any proclamation of the Gospel can only be ecclesial acts when they are rooted in the faith of the Church and are in harmony with it. «The identity of the Church in spite of and through all changes is to be found, basically, in the faith of its members, a faith which in all ages conforms to the unique and comprehensive truth of God in Jesus Christ»¹⁹.

Since faith belongs to the whole Church, the whole Church too must be the guardian of the faith. Primarily infallibility belongs to the Church. It is a charism of the whole Church rooted in the indefectibility of the Church's faith. The infallibility of the Church is the other side of the Church's abiding faith, in the act of bearing witness to that faith²⁰. Because of the primacy of the faith of the Church, the individual Christian must measure his faith against the faith of the Church, must learn from the Church and seek the truth not within himself as an individual but within the body of Christ and within himself as one with Christ's body. This, of course, applies just as much to those who teach as to any Christian. But it also applies to those who teach, in the act of teaching. They must measure the expression of faith against the living reality of the Church, against the tradition lived and passed on by the whole people of God²¹.

Xomjakov has another way of expressing that same reality when he grounds the truth on the holiness of the Church, expressed in terms of mutual love of the brethren. The measure of truth is the holiness of the Church in which Christ dwells. Where that holiness no longer exists because of the rupture of fraternal love, the truth of Christ can no longer

¹⁸ The complex question of the place of the pope in reception of teaching cannot be considered here, since it deserves special treatment.

¹⁹ Faith and Order n. 59, p. 144.

²⁰ Robert MURRAY S.J., Collegiality, Infallibility and Sobornost, in: *One in Christ* 1 (1965) 21.

²¹ Ibid. p. 27.

dwell²². The Church is holy and the Church is true because it is the temple of the Spirit of truth and love. The first letter of John directly makes the keeping of the commandments, which for the Christian is summed up in the command of mutual love, the guarantee of true knowledge of God (I Jn 2:3).

The primacy belongs then to the faith and the holiness of the Church and they are the ground of all teaching. Xomjakov's theology is problematic in that he tries to make that principle into a ministerial one, regarding the inner life of the Church as if it were an exterior ministry of truth. In doing so he emasculates the exterior dimension. Hence his ecclesiology ends up by being almost exclusively pneumatic.

There is no difficulty about accepting the primacy of the living faith of the Church. The problem comes when we try to see how this primacy is translated into the area of witness. Surely even on the level of witness to the truth or confession of the truth the whole Church must have the primacy, since infallibility is a charism of the whole Church. The whole Church too must have the primacy in teaching, that is in the faith witnessed in word and in praxis. Faith in the Church cannot remain a totally interior reality. It must be professed in word and in life.

Thomas Aquinas speaks of the confession of faith in the symbol as made, as it were, in the person of the whole Church united in faith, a faith which is animated by love²³. This is the way in which the movement is made from faith to witness. The whole Church witnessing to its faith in the profession of the Creed (and in the life of the Church) remains grounded in God's truth through the holiness which belongs to the Church, through the presence of Christ, a holiness that is expressed in mutual love. The witness of the Church is grounded on its inner life which is the pneumatic element, the communion aspect, but faith and love never exist except as incarnated. There can be no communion dimension which can be separated from the institutional. Thus, on the level of witness the whole Church too must have a primacy. But to say, as Xomjakov does, that the ministers of the Word have no real function in the Church's witness is to fly in the face of the whole tradition of the Church. However, the problem he poses is real and is actual. How do we relate the function of the ministers of the Word to the faith of the whole Church?

²² A. S. KHOMIAKOV, *L'Eglise latine*, p. 107.

²³ II-IIae, q. 1, a.9, *sed contra*.

The strict meaning of reception as evidenced in the history of the Church has led us to see that there is no organ in the Church for the exercise of reception except the bishop. Another great Russian theologian poses the problem. «A bishop of the Church, *episcopus in ecclesia*, must be a teacher. Only the bishop has received full power and authority to speak in the name of his flock. The latter receives the right of speaking through the bishop. But to do so the bishop must embrace his Church within himself; he must manifest its experience and its faith. He must speak not from himself, but in the name of the Church, *ex consensu ecclesiae*. This is just the contrary of the formula *ex sese, non autem ex consensu ecclesiae*»²⁴. There can be no doubt that Florovsky misunderstood the formula of Vatican I (aided no doubt by the normal interpretation it was given by Catholic theologians). As Georges Dejaifve has pointed out the word consensus was used several times in the debate on infallibility in the wide theological sense, the way in which it is used by Florovsky. Unfortunately the term was then used in the decree in a restricted legal sense, simply as a way of excluding Gallicanism²⁵. When it is understood that consensus is used in the decree in this restricted sense, it becomes clear that the decree is not the contrary of Florovsky's position. There is no question but that Florovsky's insight is correct, and in the sense he intends all teaching must be *ex consensu ecclesiae*.

The bishop, and the whole college of bishops (including the pope as head of the college) must be seen as ministers of the truth and ministers of the faith of the Church. As ministers, the most helpful way of considering their relationship to the whole Church is to see the parallel between their ministry of the word and their ministry of the sacrament. Just as the bishop is the minister of the eucharist so he is the minister of the word. He does not create the eucharist and similarly he cannot create the Word of God ... The eucharist is celebrated in the faith of the Church professed in symbol and expressed in the love of the brethren and the bishop is the minister of that celebration. Likewise the bishop's authority to proclaim the word remains grounded in the Church. The charism of orders is one in which the Church invokes its full authority to act in the name of Jesus, which it can do since it consciously grounds its activity on the faith and holiness of the whole Church. This is not to

²⁴ G. V. FLOROVSKY, *Sobornost: The Catholicity of the Church*. Article in *The Church of God. An Anglo Russian symposion* (London 1934), p. 72.

²⁵ Y. CONGAR, *La «réception»*, pp. 393–394.

deny the relationship between orders and Christ, but the relationship to Christ is not independent of the presence of Christ in the community. Orders is a sacrament of the Church which begins from the faith of the Church in the presence of Christ in the community.

All the activity of the Church, in ritual and in symbol is sacramental, but there are privileged moments in the Church's sacramental life that carry the authority of the presence of Christ. This presence of Christ is guaranteed by the faith and holiness of the Church. In a similar way, in the proclamation of truth there are moments in which the presence of Christ is assured by the faith and the holiness of the Church.

The abiding link with the faith of the Church was manifest very clearly in the consultation of the faith of the Church before the declaration of the dogmas of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. What was consulted was the faith of the Church, one element of which can be the consultation of the faithful. But one cannot simply equate the faith of the Church with the consultation of the faithful. The faith of the Church is not witnessed to only by what the faithful say, but by their praxis and by the prayer and tradition of the Church. Therefore, it is not a matter of counting heads, it is a being-with and a listening to the living vital tradition.

In order that it be heard, the faith of the Church must be witnessed to. Faith, as an inner reality is not accessible except through witness. And once one has moved into the sphere of witness one is already in the area of teaching. It is in this sense, that even on the level of teaching the infallibility of the whole Church is prior. The unanimity of the whole Church bearing witness to its faith cannot err. To neglect this would be to put forward an ecclesiology which would be too exclusively Christological.

However, the determination of what is the unanimous witness of the faith of the Church is extremely difficult. For that reason, it very often demands a determination by those charged with the ministry of the Word. To deny the need for this would be to end up with an ecclesiology which is so Spirit dominated that one is led into enthusiasm. But this must in no way detract from the primacy of the faith of the whole Church and the teaching of the whole Church. Because we are now very conscious of the need to assert this primacy there is a danger that we will be tempted to make a kind of ministerial witness out of the faith witness of the whole Church. It is important to distinguish between the teaching of the whole Church which is the witness of the faith and ministerial teaching. Ministry should not be

over-stressed, which it would be if one were to try to make a kind of ministerial teaching out of the Church's witness.

Reception, in the technical sense, is exercised by the whole Church, but through the bishop who acts in the name of his Church, manifesting its experience and its faith. But it would be a mistake to think that reception should be limited to that moment. There must be on the part of the bishop a prior 'reception' which is a listening to the faith of his Church and there must be a subsequent reception by the Church which is the living out of the proclaimed Word of God. The reception of a Council is not simply a matter of the will obeying its decrees, but of the intellect evaluating them in the context of different cultures, philosophies and languages²⁶. It is in this way that ministerial teaching must be seen in its place. Its purpose is to serve the living faith and witness from which it draws its authority (the authority of Christ dwelling in the Church) just as the ministry of the eucharist serves the presence of Christ in the community from which that ministry derives its authority (the authority of Christ mediated through the community).

The Church responds to ministerial teaching by living out the message proclaimed, giving it a new dynamism always demanding a new expression. The history of the Church provides many examples of this. Ephesus was received by Chalcedon and considerably developed. Vatican I was received by Vatican II but it was also completed and developed, particularly in its teaching on the ministry of bishops.

Finally there can be a form of non-reception in the Church which is another sign of the primacy of the faith and witness of the whole Church. Even when something is very explicitly taught by pope and bishops there can be a form of non-reception. Such non-reception does not mean that a teaching is false but it does mean that it has no real message for the Church. A teaching may be of no significance for the faith and the holiness of the Church and if this is so it will have no impact. A teaching may be accepted as true but make no difference to the life of the Church. In this way the whole Church exerts its primacy. It is only when a doctrine or teaching vitally touches the good of the Church, that the Church filled with God's Spirit of truth and holiness responds to that message by accepting it with joy and lives out that message in love. That is the ultimate meaning of reception and it is the only one that finally matters.

²⁶ Ibid.