# THE MYTH OF AUTHORITY

By PAUL EDWARDS

*'Save Fr Edwards from Discommunication By Moneygrubbing Bishops'.*

THE NOTICE IS surprisingly neatly written, is painstakingly underlined, was found hanging on a classroom noticeboard and I cherish it exceedingly. Our bishop in no way deserves to be called 'money grubbing'. And I doubt very much whether I was ever in danger of 'discommunication'. But I was under a cloud – a rather murky cloud – of clerical disapproval. I had said mass in the sixth-form block for some sixth-formers, and, after giving them an explicit warning that the occasion was somewhat of an experiment, I had taken a few liturgical liberties. They were, in my eyes at any rate, quite minor liberties; the most extreme was that I only wore a stole over my usual black clothes. To judge by the reactions of my fellow-clergy, this liturgical near-nudity might have been physical and 'full-frontal'. There were angry expostulations and shocked interrogations. The parish priest living nearest to the school found himself assailed at a clergy meeting. The chairman of the governors of the college telephoned the bishop. The headmaster was sent for to Bishop's House.

I had no idea that notoriety was so easily earned. The experience was strangely remote. No-one offered a word of criticism to my face; no-one ever asked me a single question as to what I had done or not done. It seemed to me (naturally one enhances whatever bit of melodrama comes into one's little life) that I was being accused without being informed of the accusations; that I was being tried without being present at my own trial, that I was being judged without having pleaded guilty or not guilty. It was all happening at a distance; I got only unofficial, secondhand and scrappy information. Yet I was the cause and centre of all this disturbance. It was as though Kafka and Solzhenitsyn had co-operated to produce a bizarre trifle.

The bishop, whose tolerance I have experienced over two years and who does not really fit into this sort of melodrama, let the matter drop. If things had gone otherwise, the fifth form were

ready, as we have seen, to defend me. 'Come here, you lot', one fifth-former, with whom I clash once a week, was heard to yell through a window. 'You've got to sign this. Fr Edwards is getting the push'. I believe they collected a hundred signatures. As far as I can make out, there was no formulated petition; just signatures!

If I had been arraigned by the bishop, my defence was ready. Of course, it would have had to vary with the charges made. But the charge against which I had prepared my case was the one reportedly made by a high-ranking cleric, 'How can he bring down Christ on the altar while disregarding the authority of the Church?'

Since the context was liturgical, I intended to begin with the missal. I meant to point out that in 1661 it was forbidden to print vernacular translations of the missal. With Europe still torn between catholicism and protestantism, that prohibition can be seen as, if not in the least sensible, perhaps faintly understandable. But as late as 1857, translations of the ordinary of the mass into the vernacular were once more prohibited. With the growing literacy of the european proletariat, the ban was often ignored and missals with vernacular translations were widely published. Yet it was only in 1897, which is within the lifetime of the oldest of us, that the prohibition disappeared from the Index. And a generation or less later it was a matter of 'every catholic should have a missal', and for the devout lay catholic the black-bound, gilt-edged, book in which he or she followed the mass was a highly treasured possession. But a generation before, the cherished missal was technically a 'prohibited book', along with those writings which the authorities considered heretical and immoral. The dialogue mass has a similar, if much briefer, history. Before the second world war, the practice of the congregation actually speaking their own part of the mass, and not listening in silence to it being bleated by an altar boy, was more than once condemned. Now it is highly commended and has become standard practice. The stones which the master-builders so authoritatively reject sometimes turn up in the most imposing positions.

Talking of building, I recall the period a dozen or so years ago when the institution which I then served was furnishing a new school chapel. Some of us wanted an altar at which we could say mass facing the congregation. The diocesan canonist was consulted; and when he had finished expounding the rigmarole of regulations concerning the altar and the tabernacle, we could not see our way to do what we wanted and at the same time preserve the legalities.

So we built a traditional altar. A couple of years later, mass facing the congregation became not only legitimate but highly laudable. Obedient as ever, we dragged a fifty-year old wooden altar out of a side chapel and put it on the sanctuary and celebrated behind it. There was not even room to genuflect between this rickety old object and the steps leading up to the new, imposing and already obsolete altar behind one. The stone which the builders had obediently chosen had mucked up everything! But if we had had the courage (or sinful temerity?) to be incorrect in 1960, our arrangement would long before 1970 have been 'wholly in accordance with the mind of the Church'.

My historical discursus would certainly have tried the bishop's patience, especially as I seem to be trying to prove that it is the disobedient who are always proved right in the end. If he were still willing to listen, I should then have asked whether I am really meant to believe that it was very wrong to print a translation of the mass in 1890 and very right to do it in 1930; whether the dialogue mass deserved condemnation before the second world war and commendation in 1956? Or do prohibitions sometimes prohibit what is no longer harmful, sometimes even prohibit what was never harmful at all?

For some people, even in these days of 'reappraisal', these questions do not exist. For them what is prohibited is wrong; what is ordered is the right thing to do. They do not ask whether some course of action be moral or immoral, orthodox or unsound, helpful or hindering, wise or inane. They take it for granted that the decisions of authority are never less than wholly good and wise, orthodox and practical. Fatuous though this attitude may be, the situation has a worse aspect. For such people it is the decision of authority which constitutes the essential, intrinsic rightness or wrongness of an action. I do not exaggerate. When the 'theatre law' which forbade english clerics to go to a licensed theatre was repealed, the communication which brought the welcome news added, 'Canon 1940 which forbids attendance at indecent or unbecoming shows remains in force'. You see, it needs a canon to make it indecent or unbecoming for a cleric to go to an indecent or unbecoming spectacle. I believe that I could preach blatantly unprepared sermons for a year without any official rebuke, that I could say mass regularly in a rushed and slovenly fashion, and not a curial mouse would stir. But let me say mass very carefully and devoutly without vestments, and the monsignori will rend their

fuschia-coloured garments – or more literally telephone the bishop. The explicit rule, the published instruction is everything. Or to put it another way: 'There's nothing right or wrong, but promulgated regulation makes it so'.

When such an attitude is stated as a principle, it is so patently absurd as to need no refutation. But there are people – a surprising number of people – who act as though it were true. Then there are good and not wholly unwise men who, while they would never subscribe to the shallow legalist positivism I have described above, still tend to reduce every question they can to one of obedience. I once had to comment on a projected sixth-form religious syllabus. The priest who had composed it was a man of depth and originality, an inspiring teacher and lecturer. There was depth, originality and inspiration in his scheme. Yet I was aghast to discover that his central aim was to persuade the teenager to accept the authority of the Church. The scriptural nature of the presentation, the solid theology of the course, were all meant to subserve that end, submission to the institution. Another priest, less learned, but of great sincerity, once told me the formula by which he lived in these confused, confusing days. 'Our Lord saved the world by his obedience and it is by my obedience that I work with him'. Sounds irreproachable, does it not? But it contains an enormous equivocation. The obedience of Christ was the acceptance of his Father's will; this priest's devoted obedience was to every instruction that comes out of ecclesiastical bureaucracy.

A boy I once taught thought at the age of eleven that he wanted to be a priest. The bishop of that diocese, enquiring into the whole situation of vocations in his diocese, directed that the name of every boy who might have a vocation to the priesthood should be sent to him. The parish priest informed the parents of this particular boy that his name was being forwarded. They objected. They certainly hoped that their son would be a priest, but they very sensibly attached little importance to such aspirations on the part of a boy of eleven. They maintained that the very fact of his name being forwarded would make the boy feel in some way committed, and that this would hinder a really free, responsible decision at a later time. 'But' said the parish priest, 'if the bishop wants this, then it is the will of God'. Not in this case the decrees of Rome, but every instruction issuing from Bishop's House.

Then there is a myriad of religious who have been told that the will of the superior is the will of God for them. We jesuits are

commonly credited with making a speciality of this brand of obedience. We were founded by the 'soldier-saint' Ignatius, who gave us this special stamp of martial discipline, of instant tight-lipped obedience.

Most of this is unhistorical rubbish. St Ignatius of Loyola was no soldier. Soldiers, as we think of them, did not yet exist. A gentleman in Ignatius' day was expected to know how to handle his weapons. In war he was expected to be able to lead men of the common sort into battle. Some men made a career of doing so and became very good at it. But there was no Potsdam, no St Cyr, no Sandhurst, to train them. They had never been on the barracks-square, for the reason that it had not yet been invented. Armies as we think of them are the creation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was particularly in the latter that the soldier became the well-drilled automaton, giving instant, unthinking obedience. So resistant was human nature to this kind of discipline that training alone did not suffice to produce it. It had to be instilled by barbarous flogging. There was substance in the american colonist's taunts to the british regulars of 'Bloody-backs!' The splendid precision upon which the royal navy prides itself was achieved in the same period in the same sanguinary fashion. It is one of the interesting ironies of the eighteenth century that while the *philosophes* discussed liberty and humanity, an ever expanding number of their contemporaries were being flogged into immediate and total compliance with instruction.

The nineteenth century found it possible to produce the same standard of precision and discipline with less brutality. Perhaps the european was becoming more submissive. Certainly, western man has become very submissive by now. During the last three hundred years, governments have acquired immense power (the formation of disciplined professional armies being one aspect of that power), an enormous authority and a huge range of activities. Before that time, a government tried to keep its territory from being invaded, to keep some sort of law and order among its subjects, protect its commerce in a ham-handed sort of way, and take some, usually futile, precautions in time of plague and famine. If it could do these things and squeeze sufficient taxes out of its population to keep its debts manageable, then a government would be moderately content. But a modern government educates you, takes a large slice of your earnings to give them back to you if you are ill or old or out-of-work, attempts to control prices and incomes, will not let you chop a tree

down without permission and legislates about the depth of your tyre-treads. And Parliament is forever passing new legislation to give the government further powers to tackle further problems. Most of this we accept as entirely right and normal. Only the 'hippies' and 'drop-outs' demur.

Did I intend to tell the bishop all this? Did I think that he would be that patient? I hope the reader is, because this matter of the growth of the power and activities of governments is very important. There were certain pre-conditions. One was the development of communications. You cannot control in any detail people whom you can contact only occasionally and then with great difficulty. Another need is the development of the national wealth to the point where it can support a large police force and a sizeable bureaucracy. But the most interesting factor is the destruction or attenuation of elements in the national life which have some degree of independence, a cohesion of their own, a source of independent power which enables them on the rare occasion to rival, and quite normally to impede, the development of central authority. Such elements were the aristocracy, sometimes the clergy, provincial estates, privileged cities, provinces with separate traditions evoking strong loyalty. All these have to be swept away or rendered impotent. The French Revolution did precisely that, and so did much less to confer liberty on the individual than to confer liberty of action upon the central government. As a result, Napoleon had vastly more power than Louis XIV could have imagined. (While typing this article I have had an interruption of three hours darkness caused by a power cut. The trade unions are a modern version of a privileged estate which is able at times to resist the government.)

The Revolution also 'standardized' France. The patchwork of provinces, with their varying legal and fiscal systems and their diverse standards of weights and measures, were replaced by a network of homogeneous *départements*, all governed by the same legal code, the same administration, all employing the metric system. This homogeneity, this uniformity, is very much needed for the swift smooth exercise of universal – that is, universal within its own frontiers – power. It is as necessary as good roads, fleet vehicles and efficient postal, telegraph and telephone systems.

It is very important to realize that the development of centralized ecclesiastical power roughly parallels that of the secular power. It was spread over a longer time. And the elimination of what in the Church corresponded to local, feudal and aristocratic power in the

secular sphere was usually providential rather than deliberate. Thus the great patriarchates of the east passed into schism and then were over-run by Islam. The episcopate was in a strong position for a long time. A bishop did not normally owe his appointment to Rome, even if Rome had confirmed it. Some bishops were secular rulers in their own territory. Most were of political importance in their own countries. After the reformation, catholic bishops in a protestant country, if they were tolerated at all, were in a very weak position vis-à-vis Rome. In catholic countries, the nineteenth century with its revolutions, secularization, and anti-clerical governments, reduced the episcopacy to a similar dependence on Rome. Whereas the bishops had once played the role of an aristocracy, they came to have the position rather of a bureaucracy, no longer a sacerdotal baronage but an ecclesiastical civil service.

The revolution in communications benefited the papacy as it did governments everywhere. Bishops could be summoned for their *ad limina* visits. Railways and steamships took papal envoys swiftly to their destinations and carried back their reports. The telegraph communicated the wishes of Rome even quicker. At the same time, standardization was deliberately aimed at. Local liturgies were discouraged. Regional canon law was superseded. National synods were frowned upon. The most promising young clerics from all over the world were brought to Rome to absorb *romanità*. Before the nineteenth century no-one, I think, would have confused union and uniformity. By the end of that century, it was very difficult for a catholic not to.

This article is not written in the spirit of '1984'. I am not protesting against the expansion of secular government. Presumably, if we are to deal with a problem like that of pollution, we shall need more legislation, more restrictions, more supervision. At the same time, I think that the 'hippy' protest deserves respect. Perhaps we should not regard freedom as indefinitely expendable in the purchase of material security. And I am not protesting against the growth of papal power. I do want to state that its development roughly parallels that of secular government and is partly due to the same causes. I want it to be seen in its present form as something comparatively recent.

So many conservatives act and speak as though a highly centralized papacy administering in detail a church as standardized and uniform as possible were an indispensable, perhaps the most indispensable, part of the Church's life. But then, conservatives

usually have very little sense of history. History proclaims fluidity, where the conservative wants to impose rigidity. The conservative wants all tomorrows to be like yesterday. He forgets, or usually does not know, that yesterday was quite different from the day before that. So the catholic conservative commonly wishes to preserve authority in the form in which it came to be exercised yesterday, treating that form as a kind of permanent sacrament, one much more essential to the Church's life than the other seven.

It is not only a matter of papal authority. There has grown up a widely-spread conviction that all religious authority should be 'total'. By that term I mean that authority has a monopoly of knowledge, judgement and decision, while 'subjects' are there simply to obey. 'Total' authority stems from the prussian army manuals rather than the gospel. It smacks more of the Hohenzollerns than the apostles. But the autocracy of Rome is copied at diocesan level. So Cardinal Manning informed his laity that 'in the Church there is no House of Commons'. Please note that he sees this not just as a fact, but as what ought to be. How many religious superiors have behaved as complete autocrats, thinking that that was what religious authority called for! Were they not upholding the ancient tradition of religious discipline, which had been given its final form by St Ignatius, the 'soldier-saint'? (The 'soldier-saint', who never wore a uniform and never saw a parade-ground.)

In the secular sphere, the benefits of strong, centralized government are surely incontrovertible. If we are to deal with poverty and pollution, its activity must become even more pervasive. The centralization of church government can be justified in the same way. The nineteenth century church produced a more devoted episcopate, a more seemly clergy, a more observant laity than had existed for a thousand years. (In crediting the centralized papacy with this triumph, I may be arguing *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. But then my respect for authority is such that I always give it the full benefit of the doubt.) As for religious orders, originally most monasteries were autonomous and a good deal of their business was managed more or less democratically in chapter. This structure has for the most part given way over the centuries to centralized congregations and local superiors responsible in no way to their 'subjects', but only to higher superiors. Presumably this change came about largely because it was found to work better for the preservation of religious ideals and more efficient apostolic endeavour. 'It works better'. This is the justification for having a centralized bureaucratic

state rather than feudalism or patriarchal tribalism. It is also the justification for vatican centralism, diocesan imitations thereof and convent autocracy. There is no mystical spiritual 'must' about them. The Church is no more and no less the Church of Christ when the bishops are all nominated by Rome than in the period when they were elected by the local churches. The liturgy is no more valid when it is prescribed for in detail by the Congregation of Divine Worship than when it sprang from local tradition and local inspiration. The New Testament was not incomplete before the promulgation of the code of canon law.

When we reflect on modern secular government, we may legitimately assess what we have sacrificed of liberty, independence and initiative in tribute to Caesar, in return for his benevolent protection. It is worth asking how good a bargain we have had. Nor is there anything sacrilegious in asking how much we have paid in the same coinage to the papal curia and father superior. I am inclined to think that the latter has had the lion's share. Of course, he had a vow of obedience to invoke. Yet he rarely invoked it. There was little need when he was backed by generations of propaganda about obedience.

My personal feelings in this matter run strong and bitter. It seems to me that ever since I left the seminary I have been humiliatingly exploited by other men. They directed the institutions in which I served according to their judgement, values and tastes. One's views were sometimes asked, but never, as I recall, about fundamental objectives, principles or priorities. I have had no more say about the central direction of the places in which I have worked than the milkman. I have earned money and someone else has spent it, and never, never have I been told on what. Now I have been very fortunate in my superiors. Everyone of them had my respect and had it because he earned it. They were good, conscientious priests; they were humane and decent men. But they unreflectingly worked an iniquitous system. This was not the system set out in the Constitutions of my order. They call for consultation; they even institutionalize it. But they have been quite overborne by the steady movement to what I have previously called 'total' authority. That movement has continually enhanced 'authority' and eroded the position of the 'subject' until the subject is nothing and the superior everything. All fundamental thinking, all serious judgement, all major decisions belong to the superior alone. Mine not to reason why; mine usually not even to be told why; mine

often enough not even to be told what, in that one so often did not even hear of decisions, but saw things happen and presumed that they did so as a result of decisions taken in the 'corridors of power'.

If religious virtues and apostolic work flourished under these conditions, they did so at a very heavy price. Men and women were reduced to the condition of Aristotle's 'natural' slave, the human being who lacks the power of deliberation and so is only an 'animate instrument'. Often one has rung up a convent to ask at what time one was to say mass or on what day one was to hear the nuns' confessions. So often the nun answering, when she has realized that there was a priest on the line, has refused the responsibility of giving him these simple bits of information. 'I'll get Mother', she usually said. Dealing with priests calls apparently for the charismata of the Superior.

Does all this sound like the 'bad old days'? Surely there are now community discussions, provincial assemblies, opinion surveys, and every one is consulted and informed, participates and is related to. And not only in religious congregations. Dioceses have their Priests' Council, so that the pooled wisdom of the presbyterate may be available to the bishop. National synods of bishops, suspect and discouraged in the last century, meet again. 'Total' authority, as I termed it, has descended from its throne and gone into permanent exile in the past. Dialogue reigns in its stead and we shall all talk happily ever after. Even layfolk, perhaps.

I should like to see these sacred seminars discuss the proposition: 'The dead have more power than the living'. To any group, perhaps the Synod of Bishops, which found the statement somewhat cryptic, I should expand it thus. The circumstances of the present are overwhelmingly the legacy of the past; you can normally hope only to change a minority of them; it requires a very strenuous persistent revolution to do more. To come to the point more bluntly, do we seriously believe that 'total' authority, having taken centuries to mount the steps of the throne and then to ensconce himself there, has been banished for ever because a lot of us have walked around the walls of his citadel shouting the word 'Consultation'? The habit of exercising 'total' authority is deeply ingrained among our leaders; and the habit of expecting it to be exercised is almost equally ingrained among the led. For many of the first, consultation is still a gracious, though usually ungraceful, gesture rather than an obligation; while too many of the led prefer to be able to criticize decisions rather than to have responsibility for them.

But there is a greater snag. Far too many 'progressives' are really leaders of the old style, but leading in a different direction. Many liturgical reformers impose their reforms on their congregations as unilaterally as the old-fashioned cleric. I have heard of parishioners being nagged by progressive priests for sending their children to catholic schools, as they used to be for not sending them. Priests who urge nuns to get 'with it' can be as dominating and paternalist in their attitude to the nuns as any of their traditionalist predecessors. Sartre put this point in a different, but perhaps parallel context: '*Qui est-ce qui déstalinisera les déstalinisateurs?*' (Who will de-Stalinize the de-Stalinizers?).

It would be pleasant if life were simple, but it often isn't. Theological heresies, I think, are for the most part illegitimate simplifications. It is very much easier not to have to conceive of there being three persons in God, not to have to reconcile two natures in Christ, not to have to believe that what is to all sense-evidence bread and wine has become the body and blood of Christ. But it is not only in the sphere of dogma that we are tempted to simplify. Perhaps because the Church has so faithfully preserved the bewildering complexity of her dogma, she is all the more tempted to simplify in matters of daily practice and administration, to reduce them as far as possible to questions of authority, to reduce all sources of authority to the one centralized government, and to impose the maximum standardization and uniformity. And the progressives, poor men, with a myriad of reforms to carry through, could hardly remain sane unless they over-simplified the problems and their solutions.

We must not do it. The pope is the successor of St Peter. But to reduce the rest of us to mindless oar-pullers in St Peter's barque is an illegitimate simplification. The Spirit moves in the whole Church. But it is an unjustifiable over-simplification to conclude that it should be run as a rousseauist democracy. Even the question of what the priest should wear at mass, just what prayers he should say and what gestures he should use, ought not to be reduced to asking what the rubrics say. That is one important factor. Another is the character of the congregation; the nature of the occasion a third; the pastoral purpose of the priest on this occasion yet another.

There, my Lord, my defence rests. I hope that even if I am judged to have been insubordinate, I shall not be found guilty of over-simplifying the issue.