WHATEVER YOU BIND[1]

By GERALD O'COLLINS

FROM THE 1960s into the late 1970s I have sometimes found myself in one of those 'Where were you when so-and-so happened?' conversations. Two of the events to be nominated have been fairly predictable: the assassination of John Kennedy and the publication of *Humanae Vitae*. The death of the American President brought a great and deep shock to millions of people who had seen embodied in him their dreams for a better world. But there was little that could be done beyond reacting with horrified disbelief. The appearance of *Humanae Vitae* was different — at least for Catholics.

On that day in July 1968, I was having lunch with two protestant friends in Frankfürt. A newspaper boy dashed in and out of the small restaurant. I can still recall vividly hoping that my friends had not glimpsed the headline: 'Pope says no to Pill'. Even as late as 1968, Catholics still thought of themselves and were thought of as a disciplined and united body. Obedience to authority had created conformity and cohesion. But it took no special insight that summer to predict what the papal pronouncement would cause: a dissent that ran through the ranks not only of the laity but also of the bishops, priests and religious.

Humanae Vitae meant a hard and bitter agony for many Catholics. One catholic journal did nothing to heal and help the situation when it dismissed the encyclical as 'nothing other than the private theological opinion of the Bishop of Rome'. Yet not much good came from pronouncements at the other extreme, like the public advice of one vicar-general: 'When the Pope issues a decree, whatever we may believe in our hearts, outwardly we must accept'. The first statement showed how far irritated discontent could go. The second statement falsified rather than clarified the theory and practice of Church authority.

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[1] This article was written during a stay at the Caritas Pirckheimer House in Nuremberg. I wish to express my warm thanks to the jesuit priests, brothers and scholastics in that residence for their generous hospitality and intellectual stimulus.

As with many other aspects of their life of faith, Catholics at that time *felt* more about authority than they explicitly knew and could express. Authority may have been frequently mentioned, but it was rarely adequately described and thought about. When they came to articulate their belief, all too often Catholics contented themselves with such opposing theses as: 'Christian obedience is no more than a call to dialogue', or 'We must at all costs maintain loyalty to the holy Father'. For different groups, statements like these may have been emotionally satisfying, but for the most part they were intellectually and theologically worthless. As regards the first, St Paul portrays the essence of christian obedience not as a call to dialogue but as a whole-hearted response to God's love revealed in Christ. This is 'the obedience of faith' — the theme with which the apostle begins and ends his classic letter to the Romans (1, 5; 16, 26). As regards the second statement, when the corinthian Christians assert their loyalty to various church leaders, Paul chides those who identify themselves as his special followers or as the special followers of Peter. The ultimate and overriding loyalty can only be to Jesus Christ who was crucified for them (1 Cor 1, 11ff).

In the decade since *Humanae Vitae* a renewed vision of authority has begun to take shape. A sharper sense of history, a deeper appreciation of the New Testament, and above all devout attention to Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit have contributed to this new understanding.

A general crisis of authority?

Anyone who wishes to tackle the issue correctly will observe the general crisis that has overtaken authority in the western world and beyond it. Once upon a time, very many groups had their fixed life-styles and their traditionally defined social roles. All those societies which cherished clarity, order and stability exercised a firm control over their members and showed a strong appreciation of authority. In fairly predictable fashion, the high degree of authority assigned to leaders and officials in civil society was mirrored in the life of the Catholic Church (and, for that matter, amongst other bodies of Christians). A steady control generally characterized the rule of bishops over their dioceses, of religious superiors over their subjects, and of popes over bishops and the Church at large. The general sociological, political and historical forces of society conditioned the exercise of authority within the Church.

One example from the nineteenth century can illustrate the point. Johann Baptist Franzelin (1816-86), who as much as anybody was the theological grey eminence at the First Vatican Council, paid so much attention to the divine authority that one could be justified in thinking that he valued it above all the other attributes of God. Thus the prolegomenon to his classical work on tradition and scripture referred fourteen times to God's authority, but failed to introduce other divine attributes like love, goodness and mercy.[2] The picture emerged: a chain of command from God through the Pope, bishops and priests down to the laity. All is ruled by a higher authority to which those lower down should subordinate themselves. Franzelin's theological model matched fairly well the political and social scene of his times — at least within Europe and to some extent outside it.

Since the days of Franzelin, and increasingly since the Second World War, civil authority has, in most countries, undergone great changes. On the one hand, it has in places suffered a cataclysmic decline. By bringing a revolution in transport, communications and life-expectations, science and technology have tampered with the stability of old and ordered societies. Traditional roles and life-styles have been drastically altered. Nations no longer control — or at least no longer control in their former ways — the values and actions of their citizens. Spontaneity and dissent have asserted their rights. Across the world, societies often look much less cohesive and capable of asserting the common will. A wounded gunman from the Red Brigade justifies bombings and assassinations on the grounds that 'our society is weak'. Through violent and non-violent action, civil authority has suffered widespread attrition in many 'liberal' democracies. At the same time, if such societies remove authority (or let it be removed) at one point, they often find it coming back at another. The experts are the admitted authorities in areas like medicine, education, the use of natural resources, urban planning, biology, physics and astronomy. Yet the general public and even governments will attribute disproportionate authority to such specialists, even when they pronounce on matters outside their fields of competence.

If liberalizing trends have whittled down and shifted the roles of authority in many societies, totalitarianism has, on the other hand, asserted its brutal, all-embracing power over the lives of millions.

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[2] *De Divina Traditione et Scriptura* (Rome, 1875).

Under totalitarian régimes, whether of the left or the right, civil authority has largely ceased to be a genuine authority freely accepted by the citizens, and has turned into an aggressive power imposed upon them. Even in largely democratic countries, many people distrust authority, because they detect and fear totalitarian trends.

We can risk here a huge generalization. Recent world history reveals two equal and opposite phenomena. In places, civil authority has weakened — sometimes even to the point that 'anarchy is loosed upon the world' (W. B. Yeats). But in other places, civil authority has grown and even turned into a brutal, absolute power that tramples under foot basic human rights. The publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 was sandwiched between two other events which serve to symbolize these phenomena: the May revolution in France and the August invasion of Czechoslovakia by the russian army. In the first event, students and some others (unsuccessfully) challenged civil authority and the contemporary organization of french society. In the second event, a foreign power crushed a liberalizing experiment of the czech government.

All in all, it seems more accurate at the level of civil authority not to speak of a crisis but rather of a conflict between two opposed movements: the first, roughly speaking, heading in a liberal direction and the other in a totalitarian direction. The two movements can be seen as a dialectic, each producing the other by way of reaction.

But why indulge any reflections on trends in world-government and society? What hangs upon these judgments about the current exercise of *civil* authority? Just this. We would forfeit the right to criticize Franzelin & Co., if we innocently supposed that *our* version of the functions of authority within the christian Church could somehow be miraculously preserved against any conditioning by contemporary history and politics. Franzelin's reflections were largely affected by one current phenomenon: the authoritarian aspect of much european society. Our ponderings can be influenced by various currents of thought: for instance, a softly anarchic liberalism, a modish marxism or a reactionary fascism. If it is simply one or other of these sources that effectively fuels our vision of authority within the Church, we will finish up with totally predictable but hardly authentically christian positions. We could, for example, give marxist social analysis the force of holy writ, and on that basis fashion our account of ecclesiastical authority. Or else we might attribute undue authority to scholars either inside or outside the Church. Thus the latest crop of german doctoral theses on the New Testament might

dictate what we believe about Jesus. Or some piece of research on human sexuality could become our basic authority for a major section of ethical decision-making.

We are not asking anyone to attempt the impossible: that is, to think about church authority by abstracting from our contemporary experience, by ignoring the best scholarship and wiping out our views on civil authority. We cannot choose between being influenced or uninfluenced by these factors. The choice lies rather between being unconsciously affected by such influences or critically aware of them. With such an awareness we are freed to feel our way towards a genuinely christian view of the authority to be exercised within the Church.

Church authority

'Authority' is an ambiguous word all too easily associated with freedom being suppressed and not created. Church authority has suffered such a crisis of plausibility that it might seem better to drop the term altogether and speak rather of roles, ministries or functions. However, it still appears possible and in fact advisable to keep the term and try new — or rather renewed — approaches to our vision of authority.

We can build our theory and practice around this provisional description: *Authority means being entitled to make demands on other persons.*[3] This requires unpacking as regards, firstly, the source, secondly, the limits, and thirdly, the acceptance of authority in the life of Christ's Church.

First, men and women can be *entitled* to make demands on others for various reasons. The founding fathers and founding mothers of the Church who made up the apostolic community experienced Jesus in his life, death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit. This unrepeatable experience of God's final self-revelation in Jesus Christ carried with it the unrepeatable role of founding the Church. Then the shift came, from this apostolic generation which had seen and believed, to all those subsequent generations of Christians who have not seen and yet have accepted in faith the apostolic witness to Christ (Jn 20, 29; 1 Jn 1, 1-3). Their special experience of the earthly and risen Jesus made the members of the apostolic community uniquely authoritative for later Christians. By testifying to the apostolic experience and preaching, the New Testament shares

[3] See W. Molinski, 'Authority', in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol 1, pp 129-33.

in that special apostolic authority. The authority vested in the first Christians, and especially the core group of apostles, flows over into their written records. In this derivative way the books of the New Testament are entitled to make demands on their readers.

Then personal gifts of holiness, knowledge and spiritual insight have continued to confer on Christians the quality of being entitled to be heard, respected and followed by their brothers and sisters. This is the authority enjoyed by the scholar, the prophet and, above all, the saint. In their statement 'Authority in the Church', the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission singled out those who respond more fully to the call of the Spirit: 'By the inner quality of their life they win a respect which allows them to speak in Christ's name with authority'.[4] This kind of personal authority attaches to men and women who have received particular gifts, and especially to those who submit to Jesus Christ in a more generous way and live in greater fidelity to his revelation.

Furthermore, through the ordained ministry, certain Christians exercise authority in the service of the community. Thus bishops and other ordained ministers are entitled in their given spheres to make demands on others. It is, of course, desirable that the *personal* authority of wisdom and of holiness accompany *official*, pastoral authority. But *as such*, this official authority derives from public ordination and appointment rather than from personal gifts.

Finally, it should be enough to recall a few other major examples of individuals or groups who exercise authority: popes, general councils, national conferences of bishops, religious superiors, general chapters of religious orders, and so forth. There exists a vast range of groups and individuals who for various reasons are entitled to make demands on other Christians as regards the theory and practice of their faith. In evaluating any given authority, we should first check its source. Does the authority come from apostolic function, personal charism, ministerial ordination or some other source?

Secondly, the extent and nature of the demands which individuals or groups are entitled to make on others will vary enormously. A pope can rightly expect to be heard and obeyed over a much wider area of christian life than a parish priest. A general council of the Church enjoys a larger sphere of authority than a national conference of bishops. There should be no need to pursue this point doggedly. The scope of demands which Christians endowed with authority

[4] London, 1977.

can make on other Christians will run all the way from something rather slight to matters of extreme importance.

But in no case, of course, do any Christians possess the right to make unlimited demands on others. Only the God who spoke and acted through Jesus Christ, and gave to him all authority in heaven and on earth, can make such demands. In that case no excuse is ever valid. That surely is the point of the parable of the great banquet (Lk 14, 16-24). Those who are first invited offer plausible reasons for not attending. One has just invested in some land and must go to check his property. Another wishes to try out his new team of oxen. A third is recently married and hence cannot be expected to come. They all excuse themselves politely. But Jesus's message is clear. With God no excuses, even the most courteous, are ever valid. God (and only God) can make unlimited, and even apparently unreasonable demands on us.

Thirdly, true authority is no force imposed from outside so as to control beliefs and actions. Naked power can brutally have its own way, but genuine authority will never bludgeon people into submission. If authority is entitled to make demands, it will encourage those with whom and for whom it is exercised to respond freely and find greater freedom in so doing. It persuasively encourages people not only to acknowledge and accept directives from those possessing authority, but also to grow in faith, hope and love.

We can fire and fuse these three reflections into three questions which could act as rules of thumb, especially for persons confronted with some crisis over the theory and practice of authority in catholic Christianity. Some knowledge of theology and sense of history will be indispensable if sound answers are to be found. First, who was/is speaking or acting with authority on the point at issue? The apostle Paul, one medieval pope, a series of church councils, some Vatican congregation, the present pope with the agreement of all national conferences of bishops, the present pope supported only by a minority of bishops, and so forth? Then, what was/is the point at issue? It could be a doctrine touching the heart of christian faith, like the universal value of Christ's saving death and resurrection. Or it could be a teaching on the current arms race: something which is extremely significant but which, nevertheless, as such cannot claim to be founded on God's revelation in Christ. Popes, bishops and councils can deal with revealed truths, but they may also (as part of their pastoral responsibility) teach on topics like birth control which do not precisely involve revealed truth. Church leaders, scholars, and

prophets might recall what Jesus taught, but they can also break new ground in the face of real and pressing questions which, however, are *our* questions and *not* those of Jesus, the apostles or the New Testament generally. The 'What?' will sort out revealed from non-revealed teaching, the transient from the permanent. In Mark's gospel, Jesus sharply calls on some scribes and Pharisees to distinguish between what is essential to good morals, what are merely human traditions, and what in fact are ways of avoiding basic responsibilities (cf Mk 7, 1-23).

The third question is this: What degree of authority was/is involved? One church council might teach simply in a general, pastoral fashion. Another council could put maximum authority behind its statements and directives. A papal encyclical differs from a solemn papal definition precisely in the degree of authority being invoked.

These three questions could go some way towards breaking down the black-and-white approach, both among those who maximize and those who minimize the place of authority in the Church's life. The maximalists and the minimalists often reveal the same blind spot: an inability to differentiate between issues, which then leads them to a total and universal assent or dissent. To that we now turn.

The New Testament

Limitations of space make it impossible to do more than sample a little of what the New Testament conveys about church authority. St Paul's Letter to the Galatians can be very instructive here. The authoritative tone of this letter is unmistakable, above all in the opening section, where the apostle anathematizes those who would preach a gospel different from the one he has received and passed on. Paul's forcefulness is understandable. He is dealing with an issue that lies at the heart of Christianity: the way sinful human beings are justified by and before God. Nevertheless, in presenting the truth once again to the Galatians, Paul uses a variety of arguments. He appeals as much to their experience as he does to his own apostolic authority. He argues from sacred scripture, as well as adducing the fact that the churches in Judea openly agree with his gospel. He cites not only his confrontation with Peter, but also Peter's acceptance of his gospel.

We can list some of the things which Paul does *not* do in Galatians:

> He is not content to affirm the correct doctine of justification simply on the basis of his own apostolic authority.
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> Nor does Paul require his readers to abdicate their judgment in favour of some other institutional figure: by declaring, for example, 'You must believe the doctrine which Peter teaches as a mouthpiece of God'.
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> Nor does the apostle ask his readers to abdicate their judgment in favour of some institutional group; some board of church directors in Jerusalem, let us say.

What Paul does in his Letter to the Galatians is to witness to the truth of the gospel. He expects that he will be heard and that his proclamation will be accompanied by the working of the Holy Spirit in his audience. He does not so much impose as commend his message to their free and intelligent conscience. Paul does not hesitate to present to the Galatians involved argumentation which he hopes will bring conviction. The Letter to the Galatians suggests then the following guidelines for the theory and practice of authoritative teaching in the Church.

1. *Authority should commend itself.* It should be convincing; even as Paul sets out to be convincing in the arguments he puts before the Galatians. There is no room for abdication of thought, or for mere external agreement coupled with internal doubts and dissent. What is called for is a free acceptance of a message which is intelligently understood. We are worlds apart from the advice of that vicar-general cited above: 'When the Pope issues a decree, whatever we may believe in our hearts, outwardly we must accept'. St Paul could never endorse that sentiment. It is what the Galatians believe in their hearts that matters to him more than what they do or decline to do.

2. Authoritative teaching must express and be seen to express *the common faith* of the Church. Even in Galatians, where Paul shows more concern than anywhere else to maintain that he has received his apostolic authority directly from God, nevertheless he feels obliged to argue that in his teaching he enjoys communion with the churches of Jerusalem and Judea.

3. Paul's approach indicates that church teaching should be drawn from and related to *the lived experience* of those to whom it is addressed. He writes: 'Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by

the works of the law or by hearing with faith? Did you experience so many things in vain? — if it really is in vain. Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?' (3, 2ff)

4. Appeals to loyalty and love have their place in the apostle's teaching. Paul reminds the Galatians of the friendly welcome they gave him when he first preached the gospel among them on the occasion of an illness (4, 14ff). At the same time, the letter illustrates the possibility of loyalty leading believers astray. Peter's action in separating himself at Antioch from the gentile Christians brought moral pressure to bear on Barnabas and others. Out of loyalty to Peter, they acted in a way that was tantamount to proclaiming a false gospel.

5. In presenting the truth, Paul acknowledges that what he does or rather has done proves as important as what he says. He recalls that he did not yield to some false brethren (who apparently wanted Titus circumcized) and that he opposed Peter's action at Antioch. Paul consistently recognizes that his life, no less than his proclamation, mediates God's self-revelation in Christ.[5] Here the apostle's attitude does not encourage us to press too far the traditional distinction between teaching and action, between what people in authority say and what they do. In these terms, the Holy Father is declared to be infallible in his most solemn acts of teaching, but not impeccable in his actions. But, as a matter of fact, actions can speak louder than words; and what a pope does, particularly a pope in a world of modern communications, can be as helpful (or harmful) for the preaching of the good news as what he says. This point emerges clearly from Paul's approach to the Galatians, as well as from common experience.

Finally, a cautionary footnote on St Paul. At our peril we neglect the way the apostle was conditioned, both through his historical, social and religious background and through his personal character. He was obviously a difficult, aggressive person who not only reacted vigorously, if not violently, against opponents, but also managed to clash with many of his close associates (Mark, Barnabas, Peter and so forth). When we draw on Paul for help in interpreting the place of authority in christian life, we need to recall the personal and social factors which coloured what he wrote. To put it mildly, Paul did not offer some 'pure' doctrine which came straight down from heaven.

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[5] See G. O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation* (Cork & South Bend, 1968), pp 53ff.

Caritas Pirckheimer[6]

As it happens, I am writing this article in Nuremberg on the site of a convent of Poor Clares whose last abbess, Caritas Pirckheimer (1467-1532), was one of those highly cultured and educated women of the Renaissance. She became abbess in 1503, corresponded with celebrities like Dürer and Erasmus, and encouraged her community to take advantage of the best classical, biblical and theological scholarship of the time. Erasmus remarked that 'if England had its daughters of Thomas More, Germany has its Caritas Pirckheimer'.

From 1520, the town council of Nuremberg began favouring Luther's teaching, and by 1524 had finally gone over to the side of the reformers. Religious life was scorned as a 'damnable state', and in Nuremberg most male and female religious left their monasteries. The town council threatened and cajoled the Poor Clares. They were abused for a disobedience towards civil authorities which could only cause dissent and even revolt among the general population. The convent windows were smashed. The sisters were forced to attend sermons in which the preachers denounced them as heretics, blasphemers and idolators who would finish up with the devil in hell. The climax came in 1525, when the Nuremberg council ordered the abbess to release her thirty-nine sisters from their vows and send them home to their families. She replied: 'We have unanimously decided to persevere in the old faith and our religious life. We do not wish to accept anything new that has not been accepted by the christian Church'. Three sisters were dragged out of the convent and hustled home. But when Philip Melanchthon, one of Luther's close associates in the reformation, visited Caritas Pirckheimer and urged the town council to respect the christian freedom of the Poor Clares, that they did — to a degree. From 1525, the sisters were deprived of the Eucharist and confession. They were forbidden to accept novices. The abbess died in 1532 and the last of the other sisters in 1591.

Caritas Pirckheimer's life closed with a dramatic decade in which she and the other Poor Clares of Nuremberg felt called to stand their ground. They discerned God's will in the face of conflicting demands which came from the state, church leaders, the christian tradition and the scriptures. On the basis of the widely-held axiom *cuius regio eius religio*, rulers asserted their right to decide religious matters for their subjects. Many christian leaders now saw in the New Testament

[6] See 'Caritas Pirckheimer', *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol 8, col 516.

no justification for religious life, and used the authority of scripture to undercut traditional practices and papal claims.

In that sad and frustrating time two things helped Caritas Pirckheimer to discover what was ultimately demanded of her: the authority of the wider community and the powerful presence of Jesus, 'the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls' (1 Pet 2, 25), as she called him. In her 1525 memorandum to the town council, she stressed the need 'in a period of disturbance and discord' to 'stand by the faith of the holy, christian Church and its good and commendable customs', until such time as 'changes could be accepted and confirmed by the one, holy, common, christian Church', and 'doubtful matters' could be 'clarified and settled'. In other words, Caritas Pirckheimer hoped to find the truth with and through the whole community of Christians. Their discernment and interpretation would rightly direct her practice. If the Holy Spirit was to help the 'common, christian Church' to clarify and settle matters, that Church extended beyond Nuremberg's town council, the reformers and their followers.[7] Secondly, when the Poor Clares were deprived of the Eucharist and the sacrament of reconciliation, their abbess urged them to live by that saying of St Augustine, *crede et manducasti*, 'believe and you have eaten'. And Jesus did strengthen them to live out their decision in faith and freedom till death.

Is it too much to suggest that the years since the closing of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), and the publication of *Humanae Vitae* (1968), have seen a growing sense among Roman Catholics and others that crises of authority, or any other church crisis for that matter, will be lived through and solved by devout attention both to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit dwelling in and speaking through the whole Church? This is not precisely Caritas Pirckheimer's language, but it serves to describe fairly her response to the great challenge which the reformation in Nuremberg brought her. Only Jesus, to whom all authority belongs in heaven and on earth, is entitled to make final and unlimited demands on us. His voice will be heard if we listen with patient and reverent openness to what 'the Spirit is saying to the churches' (Apoc 2, 7).

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[7] In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the Second Vatican Council declared: 'The whole body of the faithful . . . cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith of the whole people, when — from the bishops to the last of the faithful — they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals' (*Lumen Gentium*, 12).