

THE SHEPHERD AND THE TRADITION

Bishops as Teachers

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THE PROBLEMS with which we struggle in the Church today are to a large extent a matter of words, or more precisely a matter of *naming* ecclesial reality. That which we call *magisterium* and *hierarchy* might well, by some other name, spread the fragrance of the Gospel more effectively than it does at present. Theology and spirituality cannot be reduced to rhetoric, to be sure. But as we discuss the role of the hierarchical magisterium in the handing on of the christian heritage, we need to ask just what such terms, with their connotations, actually convey to our understanding. There is no more important exercise of the discernment of spirits than that of discerning the public speech of Christians. Playing with words is not all that bad, providing it disposes the players for greater enjoyment of the abundant life offered us in Christ.

Unfortunately, 'magisterium' now seems to mean little more than a restrictive or nervous intervention of Church authority into the games that theologians play within sight of the people of God, and especially of the communications media. Such an unhappy image reminds one of the story of the experienced but over-anxious mother who used to say to her daughter, 'Go and see what your little brother is doing and tell him to stop'. In the Middle Ages theologians were honoured with the title of *magistri* (commonly contrasted with the title of *praelati* reserved for bishops). And there is no doubt about the role of christian parents as teachers of their children. And yet the language currently in possession countenances only one magisterium, that of the bishops. Such a view, I would suggest, may actually debase their teaching role, depriving it of the vitality which might come from an acknowledged interaction with other sources of learning within the Church.

Should we, then, simply add to 'magisterium' the qualification 'hierarchical', thus making room for others to function magisterially, though non-hierarchically? Such a solution would be like re-

arranging the furniture in a fundamentally drab room, or, at best, introducing one more awkward period-piece, whose effect is simply to heighten the drabness. Our time of overall change in world and Church is poorly served by new patches on old garments. Like 'magisterium', 'hierarchy' and 'hierarchical' are more apt to be part of the problem than part of the solution. To many modern ears they mean 'from the top downwards', merely authoritarian tactics of making sure that the future will be as like the past as possible. Not by any intrinsic sense but still by association, they conjure up 'monarchy' and 'monarchical', in a society where 'democracy' and 'democratic' no longer indicate one of several legitimate forms of government, but simply refer to the basic right of all human beings to participate actively in the decisions which shape their future. Also, the hieratic element in hierarchy suggests immobility and apartness, characteristic of the royal imagination. Is it not time, then, to relinquish terms and structures no longer apt for carrying the real meaning of christian truths and gospel values?

Yet the freedom to be critical towards prevailing language and structures needs to be chastened by a deep reverence for the values which they were originally intended to mediate; and by the sober realization that to rescue perennial values from antiquated structures is a complex and delicate operation. Sociologists and anthropologists are the first to caution naïve or romantic ecclesiastics concerning the hazards involved in the radical secularization of religious authority. The need for *sacred office*, including the office of teaching, is commended not only by biblical and theological considerations but by a sound philosophical anthropology. The Church is, indeed, a human community, not exempt from the laws which govern human institutions. Yet it is, as a community, not univocal with secular communities. It is inherently sacred, qualitatively different from secular communities, because of its unique relationship with the absolute, the transcendent, the eschatological. It mediates and sacramentalizes the divine magisterium and *divina potestas* in a way that no other human community is called to do. And because it is an enduring world-wide sign and agent of the presence of the risen Lord, it must not be deprived of the human structures needed for such mediation. Whatever the sins, personal and institutional, which mar the actual exercise of this role, and however open to modification the forms of such exercise, there is a heritage to be provided for, and values to be preserved.

There is, fortunately, a way to deal with the dilemma, though it

calls for a willingness to live without neat and instant solutions. In one of its most penetrating and satisfying coinages, the Vatican Council designated the basic method by which every aspect of the Church's life is to be renewed (including the terminology needed to reformulate christian truths): *accommodata renovatio*, the *simultaneous* return to christian origins *and* a fresh listening to the voice of the Spirit speaking in the signs of our times (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2). The following assertions are a modest effort to ponder simultaneously christian sources and our present experience on the subject of the teaching role of bishops. My aim is not so much to offer a theological position for agreement or disagreement as to encourage the reader to go and do likewise, and do it better.

There is no magisterium in the Church except that of Christ

Matthew's Gospel records a saying of Jesus which may act as a point of departure: 'You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren . . . neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ' (Mt 23, 8, 10). Located as it is at the beginning of Jesus's sharpest denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, and followed immediately by the directive, 'The one who is greatest among you shall be your servant' (v. 11), the passage has undoubtedly guided thousands of those with authority in the Church.

But we can only grasp the full import of the saying when we situate it within the broader gospel of divine grace:

No one can come to me unless the Father who has sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God'. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me (Jn 6, 44ff).

Against the background of several Old Testament prophets, Jesus is in effect describing the new creation, the last times. Through faith in him will come perfect human fulfilment: 'You will come to know the Lord' (Hos 2, 22). God himself — the Father of Jesus — will teach this knowledge of the heart: 'All your sons shall be taught by the Lord' (Isai 54, 13). Jeremiah's description of the new covenant very strikingly affirms that it is God, not any human being or institution, who is the ultimate magisterium (cf Jer 31, 34). The way of this divine pedagogy is clear; it is primarily an inner reality: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (Jer 31, 33). Neither Jesus nor Jeremiah are excluding human mediations of the divine

magisterium. They are making clear that, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, the principal law of the new covenant is the grace of the Spirit, not any external regulation (*Summa theol.* I-II, 106, 1).

There are two advantages in this return to Matthew, John and the prophets for a basic understanding of teaching roles in the Church. First, it helps us to dissociate such roles from the climates of constraint and anxiety which have come to surround them, and it places them instead in the clear climate of the gift bestowed on us in Christ Jesus. To be taught by God himself! To have within oneself, by the baptismal gift of the Spirit, an abiding source of enlightenment on every aspect of the mystery of our human lives! Excessive preoccupation with the limits of orthodoxy, and with the unquestionable right of church authorities to interpret christian faith, has obscured what is more primary and basic: that God himself is our gracious teacher. Awe, wonder and gratitude, not fear and apprehension, should characterize our experience of God teaching us through a teaching Church.

Secondly, the variety of roles in the human mediation of divine magisterium finds its unity in the person of Christ: 'You have one master, the Christ'. A literalistic interpretation of this saying of Jesus would be beside the point. He was not attempting to control the language of Christians in every cultural situation until the end of time. Rather he was cautioning us against ascribing absolute power to legitimate human roles and functions. The sense, then, of 'There is no magisterium in the Church except that of Christ' is akin to that of Augustine's famous dictum: 'whether Peter, Paul or Judas baptizes, it is always Christ who baptizes'. It is precisely because of, not in spite of, the unique magisterium of Christ that magisterial agencies in the Church have their dignity and efficacy. Nor is the distinction of *person* — worthy or unworthy, learned or ignorant — and *office* obliterated by the fact that both person and office have their efficacy by participation in the magisterium of the risen Lord. What is clear is that all teachers, all offices of teaching, have their source of grace, their criterion of truth, in their relationship to the one Teacher, Christ Jesus.

Only disciples can teach

This second affirmation is clearly rooted in the first. We tend to forget that discipleship is at the heart of all teaching and learning, and constitutes the most effective way of handing on a broad or specific wisdom from one generation to the next. Greatness

generates greatness in most of the human skills and disciplines, as well as in family and political life. This anthropological law is also a gospel law. In the fourth Gospel, and particularly in the last discourse, Jesus presents himself and the Spirit as teachers who communicate a message which is not their own, which they have had to be taught by another. Though he never assigns himself the name of disciple, Jesus was in fact the paragon of discipleship. Learning from the Father constituted the heart of his daily existence. 'He *learned* obedience by what he suffered' (Heb 5, 8). If this was true of the Teacher *par excellence*, how much more is it true of us disciples.

There are at least two reflections consequent upon this truth. First, all magisterium in the Church is well conceived as the contagion of discipleship. The person or office designated as magisterial will be faithful to this vocation in proportion to the assumption of a listening posture, in two distinct phases: (a) *as prior condition* for authentic and effective teaching: like Jesus and like the Spirit, we Christians can teach only a truth that we have first listened to; (b) *in the very act of teaching*, through attitudes and structures of respectful mutuality. Here, perhaps, Paolo Freire's philosophy of christian education might merit a special application. Too often, in Freire's language, our model for the bishop/faithful relationship has been one of 'banking': the episcopal magisterium, in sole possession of the deposit of faith, communicates it intact to a passive body of believers. What would happen if mutuality were fully honoured in this relationship, and particularly in the structures and institutions created for expressing and confirming it? What if our image and concept of the various organs of the teaching Church were to undergo a genuine change, so as to emphasize mutuality and the posture of listening? The Congregation for Religious, for example, would then be conceived as a listening post, part of the antennae of the universal learning Church, and a reflector to the many local and regional churches of the experience of the Spirit received elsewhere in the whole world. I am not suggesting that the Roman Congregations ought to be without a critical and official role, even though many exaggerate the authority actually held by them in the present law of the Church. If all the disciples of Christ are to grow in listening to his voice through many channels, including the office of bishops, these last can promote this goal best of all, perhaps, by manifesting in the public sector of the Church's life their own ability to listen as God addresses them through the signs of the times, through the experience and reflection of all the

faithful, and through the work of professional theologians. I would go so far as to suggest that the charism of magisterial office is constituted in part by this divine gift of listening.

The mediation of divine teaching in the community of disciples takes place through the interplay of (a) the experience of the entire people of God; (b) the critical/creative testing and understanding of this experience through the work of theologians; (c) the validation of this understanding by the official teaching of the Church through the bishops

What we are suggesting here is a triadic model of the learning/teaching Church which seeks to link the important roles of bishops and theologians by situating them in a broader ecclesial context. The model does not attempt to be comprehensive, and leaves much unsaid about the relationships. It suggests that the current dialogue about and among bishops and theologians has been greatly impoverished, largely because it leaves out of consideration the active contribution and the responsibility of ninety-nine per cent of the disciples of Christ.

Before we fulfil specific learning/teaching roles in the Church, we all share a common privilege and burden: that is, listening to the divine teacher as he addresses us in the whole gamut of our human experience. In contrast to an older thesis of theologians, that divine revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle, recent decades have, on solid foundations, given status to the view that God speaks to all human beings through the entirety of human existence. The concept of 'signs of the times', as elaborated by Vatican II and recent popes and theologians, is but one expression of this growing conviction that God manifests himself (and ourselves) to us in daily experience, and that this aspect of divine revelation is interwoven with our listening to him in the 'deposit of faith': that is, the primordial christian revelation and its interpretation down the ages by the whole people of God in the body of Christ.

Because it is all the disciples of Christ, singly and together, who share the call to listen to the ongoing revelation of the Spirit, the idea that the office of disciple/teacher is confined to bishops and theologians is seriously defective. If each baptized person has been given the ears of a disciple, he has also been given the tongue of a prophet and teacher (cf Isai 50, 4ff). To articulate the word of our shared christian experience in faithful and congruous language is a common responsibility. For each Christian is empowered to appropriate the beautiful introduction to the first letter of John: '... that which we

have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you have fellowship with us' (1 Jn 1, 3).

There is, then, a common and transcendent call to listen/speak, learn/teach, which is the basis of specific roles. Bishops and theologians are first of all baptized disciples; they must not be set over against 'the people of God' or 'the faithful', as a caste apart. As they exercise their special roles, they need to do so while drawing upon their own christian experience of God addressing them in the entirety of their lives: through the christian sources when they pray (and not only when they do their professional or official 'thing'); through the signs of the times; and especially through listening to how others are experiencing the word and call of God. Hence, the common christian experience, its reflective appropriation, its congruous articulation, by *all* the faithful (including bishops and theologians) is not simply to be juxtaposed to the teaching roles of bishops and theologians: it must be their matrix and common bond.

There is no space here to describe in detail what is distinctive of the role of theologians and bishops in the integral learning/teaching process engaged in by the whole Church. Each has its complexity, which cannot be reduced to a single element. Much, too, will depend on what model of the Church one is assuming. In the present context, I would highlight, as the special task of the professional theologians, the function of critical/creative interpretation of the contemporary experience of the christian people in listening and responding to the signs of the times; and *simultaneously*, a testing comparison of that response with the primordial and perennial christian faith. In what is technically referred to as a 'hermeneutical circle', theologians are engaged primarily in a work of mediation between heritage and present call. This work needs to be critical with respect to both poles. It tests the spirits at work in believers (including bishops) and in the world of today, to see if they are truly from God. But it also tests the accepted understanding of the primordial and perennial in christian faith (long-existing views on evolution and monogenism are an example), to see to what extent such an understanding has failed (as it inevitably does) to distinguish the work of God from the culture-bound word of fallible disciples.

But the work of professional theologians, dealing with both poles and with their relationship, is not only critical but creative. It aims, especially in periods of major cultural shifts like the present, to disclose unexpected compatibilities — and incompatibilities — between the Gospel and the cultural worlds which human beings

build for themselves. Apparent impasses between contemporary insights and traditional truths are eventually circumvented. Or, on the other hand, heightened christian sensibilities will come to realize that a previously tolerated human evil — such as slavery — is monstrously in conflict with the Gospel. Repeatedly, down the centuries, through the working of theologians truly in touch with the christian experience of all the faithful, God has surprised his people by showing them that one does not have to be a descendant of Abraham (cf Mt 3, 9) or a disciple of Aristotle, in order to articulate fittingly the mystery of life in the Church.

This critical/creative mediation on the part of theologians is, however, neither an end in itself nor a task that can be fulfilled with absolute autonomy. It is basically *dispositive* in its orientation. Though theologians are not 'ghost writers' for bishops (at least that is not their job description), they are indispensable precursors. They have not been ordained to a specific office in the Church; they function in virtue of their christian baptism and confirmation, together with their specialized training and developed skills. I personally prefer not to speak of a magisterium of theologians, lest there be some subtle suggestion that each and every theologian needs a 'canonical mission', a kind of licence to reflect as a professional in the Church. Some theologians may be offered by one or more bishops, and may accept, such a specific mission, which makes them intimate helpers of bishops in particular contexts: for example, the seminary training of church ministers, or the briefing of busy church prelates on difficult and important theological points. But in itself the role of professional theologian does not require such a special mission. It is a role which, analogously with religious life, does not change a person's status in the Church as institutional, though it does form a new relationship to the institutional Church. Of itself it belongs to the 'charismatic' element in the Church, as this works, not through stable office, but through the faith of Christians.

Bishops, on the other hand, do function in virtue of an office. They are empowered to speak and act on behalf of Christ to the whole Church, and on behalf of the whole Church to its members and to the world outside. Until the bishops have spoken, the common experience of Christians and the reflections of theologians remain, to a great extent, in the private domain of the Church's life. It is the listening/teaching hierarchical magisterium — to use that traditional expression — which gives public and institutional validation to what the Spirit has been saying to the many churches

and the many christians. By teaching and preaching, by overseeing the work of catechesis and religious formation, by exhorting, cautioning and setting limits, the bishops fulfil their indispensable role in naming for each age the mystery of Christ.

Finally, some major characteristics of this threefold model of learning/teaching may be indicated, under four closely interrelated headings: *conflict*, *interdependence*, *participation*, and *representation*.

(1) *Conflict*: History shows that doctrinal conflict is not only inevitable but a saving grace offered to a disciple Church. In each doctrinal crisis the paschal mystery is, or can be, realized, for the consolation of generations of God's people. We treasure most that which we have had to struggle for. Because our predecessors in the faith did not shrink from conflict, we are enriched and enlightened.

(2) *Interdependence*: The poignancy present in most Church-conflicts stems from the fact that we are struggling not with strangers but with co-members, with those whom we desperately need for the fulfilment of our own responsibilities. Paul's graphic descriptions of the body of Christ find a special application here. Bishops are severely handicapped in the exercise of their teaching office to the degree to which they are out of touch with what all their sisters and brothers are experiencing, and with the efforts of theologians. But the latter also will fail in their task if their theologizing becomes an esoteric profession, without the nourishment of christian experience and the challenge and support of the official Church. And all of us, as we seek faithfully to interpret what is happening in our lives, have need both of solid theology and sound pastoral guidance.

(3) *Participation*: Whilst interdependence accents the inadequacy of each of us apart from others, participation reminds us that nothing we own or exercise is exclusively ours. Few Christians are called to episcopal office, but all Christians are called to exercise a shepherding responsibility. Few Christians are professionally skilled in theological reflection, but all Christians have the responsibility and the gift for speaking their own intelligible word of faith. The notion of participation complements that of interdependence, by making it clear that there is no question of we/they, or rich/poor. This conviction of solidarity in a learning/teaching Church is strengthened by considering the notion of representation.

(4) *Representation*: Here I adapt for present purposes a useful distinction of Dorothee Sölle. The *substitute* supplants the other person. Because the substitute is functioning, the other person is dispensable, without responsibility — or opportunity. The *representative*,

on the other hand, fulfils a special role *provisionally* — standing in the breach, so to speak, till the one represented is empowered — and *evocatively*: that is, in such a way as to call forth the creativity of the one represented. Far from rendering the other passive or irresponsible, the representative exhibits, in the public arena of the Church's life, the kind of behaviour to which *all* are called. So it was that we were redeemed by Jesus Christ: not as our substitute, enabling us to 'get off the hook', but as our representative, calling forth in all the saved their newly bestowed power to participate actively in the redemption of humanity.

The distinction is an important one. Too often in the Church we have looked upon those called to special roles — priests, religious, contemplatives, theologians — as substitutes, not as representatives. When priests are regarded as substitutes, the priestliness of all the baptized is neglected. When religious are so regarded, the rest of the laity is encouraged to consider itself as reprieved from the struggle for perfection. A good test of how effectively a representative role is being exercised in the Church is to see whether its effect is evocative or repressive of the behaviour which it exemplifies. When the work of professional theologians tends to render other Christians diffident about their own gift of articulating christian faith on the basis of their own experience, we are in the presence of the diminishing impact of substitution. Similarly, when the teaching of bishops is taken as relieving everyone else in the Church of the privilege and burden of interpreting contemporary life from the standpoint of the Gospel, then we have departed from what Christ intended: a healthy and assertive communion of his disciples in making the Gospel present to every age and culture.

It may well be that, before the Church fully appropriates the grace being offered it in the present period of conflict, all of us need to be willing to listen to some noise. The way to enduring peace and quiet in a family is not to tell people to shut up. Even when fear or despair induces us to do so, the repressed energies will build up under the surface of an apparent calm, only to burst forth destructively at another time. When we Roman Catholics, after centuries of passivity, practise being articulate, we are bound to do it badly at times. We have to learn the gentility of dialogue, to refrain from shouting at one another, but also and especially to listen to one another as we try to stammer forth, with whatever inadequacy, such grasp on the mystery as God has given us.