

# The Authority of the Church

**Most Reverend John Murphy, D.D.,  
Archbishop of Cardiff**

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## Two Pastoral Letters

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*“ There are those who could be said to be tired of being Catholics, and who profit from this period of revision and adjustment in the practical life of the Church by putting everything under discussion, setting up systematic criticism of ecclesiastical discipline and seeking an easier road to Christianity . . . a Christianity enfeebled by removing the supports of experience and tradition, a Christianity conforming to the spirit of the world, a Christianity not binding, not dogmatic, not clerical; can such a weariness of being Catholics ever logically be derived from the Council? ”*

Pope Paul VI at Castel Gondolfo, 27 July, 1966

# 1

## The Authority of the Church

It is hard to give tongue on any subject these days without being immediately labelled. And this is particularly true in all the discussions, disputes and differences which have arisen since Vatican II. One is immediately classified as either progressive or reactionary, liberal or conservative, gathering or scattering. Everyone must stand up and be counted. Even the uncommitted find themselves assigned by unsolicited editing to one camp or the other; there is no middle of the road. And the normal Catholic who wants nothing else save to obey the Church and fulfil all that the Catholic Faith demands of him, finds himself, willy nilly, faced with a choice. It was all so simple before. Now everything is involved, and he has to be personally committed. Although the actual combatants in this golden age of theological journalism are few, and their active followers even fewer, all the People of God are conscripted into the ranks with the usual stock phrases, “No Catholic in tune with this post-conciliar age,” or alternatively,



“ No Catholic with any reverence for the past.”

Actually, the normal Catholic has no desire to be unfaithful either to the post-conciliar age or to the traditional past. He just wants to do the right thing. But he is offered some startling contrasts which cannot both be right. “ Do I follow the Church?” or “ Do I follow my own conscience?” says the bewildered Catholic. The range of goods on the theological counter with everything from the celibacy of the clergy to the pill has never been so wide, never so bewildering.

Where does the normal Catholic stand in all this? What must he make of it? It will help us in resolving this dilemma if we keep firmly in our minds two fixed points. In the first place, no matter how progressive, how reactionary or how middle-of-the-road we may be, we must keep on repeating to ourselves a simple truth; “ it had to happen.” All the changes, all the accommodations, all the reappraisals, all the mental adjustments which we ourselves have had to make painfully during the last few years, all this is a necessary adjunct of Vatican II. It had to happen; it could not have been avoided. It should not have been avoided.

But having said that, we must likewise keep on telling ourselves another truth even more important, that none of these things needed to happen in the way they did, with a cleavage of loyalty, a revolt against authority, a revolt against tradition, a setting up of conscience against the Church. None of these things ever arose, or were part of Vatican II. The grass roots of Vatican II never produced that cockle. None of that can be blamed on the Holy Ghost or Vatican II.

## Compassion, true and false

How, then, did it all happen? It arose in this way. Vatican II had placed upon us all the necessity of restating Catholic doctrine in a way which carried a meaning to contemporary society. There were all sorts of reasons for this. But the primary reason was that of compassion and love. The Church, like Christ, had compassion on the multitude. It wanted to share its treasures with the world. It realized that the Church and the world had drawn apart and were speaking a different language.

Pope John had prepared the way for this, and the Council was an acceptable time for implementing it, offering the truth to the world in its own language and without rubbing their noses in it. The whole ecumenical movement was born of this compassion, a sincere and lively compassion.

But its very compassion, if misplaced, could be its worst enemy. We carry the precious gift of the Faith in frail ecumenical vessels, and any false concealment, any false accentuation born of false compassion, and we have a heresy on our hands. The ecumenist who, knowing that a particular truth of the Faith carries little meaning or conviction to contemporary man, thereby plays it down or conceals it, instead of painfully searching for a language which would be relevant, is a false shepherd who feeds nobody but frightens everybody. He may not have angry sheep on his hands, but he still has hungry ones.

“ Send her away for she crieth after us ” said the Apostles to Christ concerning the Chanaanite woman. But it was a false compassion and a false ecumenism. They were more concerned with saving her embarrassment than with giving

It had to  
happen

her the Faith and the miracle she asked for. Christ, on the contrary, appears to be far less compassionate. In fact, he almost appears to be cruel and to be bating her. "I am not sent but to the sheep that are lost of the house of Israel ;" "It is not good to take the bread of the children and to cast it to the dogs", he says: all positively rude and unecumenical, and for the moment we are almost ashamed of the truth and of Christ.

But in the end, it is Christ, not we ourselves, who is compassionate and ecumenical. We with our false compassion would have spared her and sent her away without her Faith and her cure, It is Christ who gives her both. "O woman, great is thy faith. Be it done to thee as thou wilt."

There will always be in every movement the false prophets who want to clean up the problem by sweeping it out of sight; who seek the slick solution, the quick anodyne, the ready aspirin. Remove the pain and forget the cause. Solve the mixed marriage problem, admit the validity of Anglican Orders, allow joint churches, pulpits, divorce and the pill, and all will be well. All won't be well. We have removed the very troubles which drive men to seek unity.

Non-Catholic ecumenists are often more aware of this than we give them credit for. Archbishop Ramsey, praying in the Sistine Chapel, asks God "to enable us to feel the pain of our division." His predecessor, Archbishop Fisher, once warned the World Council of Churches that "united action can become a narcotic rather than a stimulant." And the Secretary of the same World Council, Dr.

Visser t'Hooft warned everyone against "ecumenical varnish covering up real differences."

It was said of George Bernard Shaw that he sought the amusing rather than the truthful. It could, likewise be said of false ecumenism that it is more concerned with avoiding the embarrassing than promoting the truthful. All of which has produced a theological unilateralism, a picking and choosing, embracing one truth and ignoring another which upsets not only the delicate balance of the Faith, but the delicate conscience of the faithful. The Liturgy, for example, must always hold its primacy over private devotions and every effort must be made to secure this. But if, in securing it, there is any denigration or extermination of private devotion, then we are creating a dangerous back eddy which could threaten even the Liturgy itself.

Again Altar should balance with Table, Sacrifice with Meal, Tradition with Scripture, Sacramental Priesthood with the Priesthood of all believers, Freedom with Responsibility, Personal Conscience with the Laws of the Church. All these are complementary, as the red and white corpuscles of the blood stream, and any violent change in the blood count here, and we have a cancer of the Faith.

### The Church's Authority

All of which reduces itself to the vital question. Granted that we must restate all the doctrines of the Church in this new language, how do we perform this delicate operation without any lack of balance, without any false accentuation, without any false compassion?

The overriding necessity here is to recognize that speaking this new language is the most

### False ecumenism



difficult task that the Church has ever assigned herself. We are exploring new country, cutting new trails, balancing truth on a razor's edge. It is flatly impossible to do this without being tightly roped to the magisterium of the Church. This is a "must."

Unfortunately, quite a number of writers look upon the magisterium as a beetling encumbrance to be circumvented, rather than a fixed cleat through which all movement is belayed. Strange ideas of intellectual freedom drawn from other disciplines demand a free climb, stripped of all the trappings of the magisterium. And all this in the uncharted regions of the Faith which soar above the level of scientific demonstration, and where every climber is blind and a potential danger, unless he is roped to the magisterium. This faculty, like any other faculty, has its disciplines, and avalanches are caused by fools who disobey them. The magnificent Pauline phrases, "the glorious liberty of the children of God"; "the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free" have been given a new and dangerous twist, a freedom to disobey. This was never envisaged. It was obedience which made us free. It was embracing the law with love and personal commitment which changed it from a cold and barren law into an expression of love.

Again, personal commitment has been so twisted that it becomes our old friend 'private judgement' under a relevant disguise which cloaks its old heretical undertones. It has been used as just another name for doing nothing, accepting nothing, obeying nothing, unless one can see the reason for it and can be 'personally committed'.

"The time will surely come when men will grow tired of sound doctrine, always itching to hear something new, so that they will provide themselves with a continuous succession of new teachers, as the whim takes them." That time has surely come. We should not be afraid of it. It could be a challenge as well as a danger. If the ears are itching, it is up to us to speak our old doctrines in a language which takes care of the itch.

This is never easy. It is not made any easier by those who are too ready to see heresy in every turn of phrase, or by those who are too ready to repudiate the magisterium. In this renewal, the magisterium is our only fixed point. Even a revolution must revolve around something.

*Pastoral Letter, Advent 1966.*

## Criticism of authority

I almost feel embarrassed to write this letter, as if in some way I doubted the strength of your Faith, or the warmth of your affection for the Church. Let me say at once that I don't. The strength and the devotion and the affection of the laity are a recurring miracle to every priest, and there is not one of us who doesn't feel a worm and "an unprofitable servant" every time we encounter it. None of us is worthy of our people. We can only say with St. Augustine: "Augustine is a Bishop of the Catholic Church. I should think he is a good man. If he is not, he is the one who knows it. But good or bad, he is not the object of your hope. It is in Christ, not in His minister, that we place our hope."

Why, then do I write to you? I write almost as a fond but frightened parent, proud of his children, confident in their judgment, and yet at the same time unreasonably fearful that if he keeps quiet, all this unwelcome publicity and criticism which the Church has received in recent weeks might weaken their Faith . . . a

criticism of the institutional Church which has increased so much recently that it is almost becoming a heresy in certain quarters to commend a priest or a bishop. It is many moons since we headed a popularity poll. But a new phenomenon has now occurred where even the Holy Father himself is not exempt from criticism. Curates may take some consolation that the criticism is heading upstream and not down.

### All authority under attack

What do we make of it all? Is the Barque of Peter breaking up? Is this new spate of criticism wholly unwelcome? I think it would be wise if we got the whole matter in perspective. In the first place, the attack is not solely on the Church. It is on all authority. Politicians and policemen are suffering just as much as parents and priests. And this criticism is not entirely unwelcome. The Church may be a divine institution, but it is clothed and administered in human garments, and these can get torn and tattered. A little needling, a little patching, a little pressing, can smarten us all up a little. No, there is a role for honest criticism, and every man in authority whether he be priest or parent, politician or policeman, should welcome it.

Nor is this criticism of authority a new phenomenon. The most we can claim is that in this independent and scientific age, it has become a little louder and a little less reverent. But it has always been there. Each new generation renounces the old and is convinced that all wisdom starts with it. Murray Kempton remarked that every new generation gets on in the world by parricide, by murdering its parents. And the French have a definition of promotion,



which they define as being called a fool by an ever increasing number of subordinates.

## The new establishment

Criticism there has always been in every generation. But I think we will have to admit that in our generation, apart from the intensification, it has taken a new and dangerous twist. The attack is not now just on those in authority, but simply on authority as such. There is a real smell of anarchy here. Formerly, we were taught "never kick a man when he is down." Now there seems to be a universal imperative: "always kick a man when he is up". Since whoever he is, whatever he is doing, he is exercising authority and demanding obedience, and both of these are fast becoming dirty words.

There is a new crusade against authority. It is led by a mitred army of columnists, pundits, playwrights, producers, interviewers, who have set themselves up, quite apart from their fellows as keepers of the public conscience. They are the new establishment. To this particular group, everyone who exercises authority is a sadist, a masochist, an inquisitor, or any other of the hurrah words in common coinage. They are the modern entertainers who smell a story, or sense an entertainment in any rebellion against authority, and are out to exploit it. Into their satire goes everything that smacks of authority—marital fidelity, filial piety, the moral code; nothing sacred, nothing sacrosanct; the modern Neros who fiddle whilst Rome burns. And when there is little left from the bonfire but a nation of drug addicts, sex maniacs, abortionists and criminals, and the glorious affluent society has become an affluent one, it will be poor consola-

tion to know that it wasn't serious, that it was all done for a giggle.

## The attack on the Church

It is in this context that we must see the attack on the Church. In an age which is over-preoccupied with sex and over-resentful of discipline, the Catholic Church stands out as a bastion and a symbol of all that is reactionary. Any signs of a break here, or any signs of a weakening are received in alarm in orthodox circles, but cheerful sympathy in these others, and it is immediately front line news. We have a duty here to reassure the world by our unquestioning loyalty and obedience that we hold fast without flinching, to everything that has been handed down to us by an infallible Church. Only then, and outside these limits, are we willing to swing the Church to the passing rhythm of the day.

In this context, it is well to remember that the Church as Christ founded it is not a democracy. Its ministers are not elected by popular vote or choice. You can say that again, say the critics. But the fact remains that priests are chosen by God. It is a divine call. God takes a calculated risk when He calls us to the ministry, just as He takes a calculated risk with all of us when He gives us free will. It is probably for this reason that many good Catholics remain silent, even though they would be perfectly justified in criticising their clergy and Bishop. They fear to raise their voice against the Lord's anointed. One of the pleasant features of the recent unwelcome publicity we received is that none who rose up to defend the Church did so by attacking the ex-priests. Far be it from me to undermine such piety and such loyalty. But it

would be intolerable of any priest if at any time or in any way, he took advantage of such shelter to protect his own shortcomings.

Again precisely because we are not dealing with a democracy, decisions are not made by majority votes. The controversies on birth prevention, on celibacy, are not to be decided by popular votes or by opinion polls. These things are decided by the Holy Father in the overall interests of the Church. It is a difficult task, and a difficult decision. We cannot expect everyone to understand these decisions. But we can expect all laity, and certainly all priests to respect and to obey them. It is precisely by such obedience to lawful authority that we can restore to its rightful place the position that authority and obedience have lost in society. Even those disciplines which do not involve the magisterium of the Church are so intimate to the person of Christ and to His Church that their removal is best left to His Vicar. And the celibacy of the clergy in the Western Church is surely one of these.

*Pastoral Letter, February 1967.*