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REVIEW ARTICLE

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The Nature and Exercise of Authority in the Church

This article reviews a collection of essays, Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice, *edited by Bernard Hoose. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002. Pp. xii+253. Price £45.00. ISBN 0-7546-0531-0.*

This volume is part of the 1996 Authority and Governance Project sponsored by the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical and Theological Education. It is a collection of some fifteen essays and is meant to contribute to the process of studying and discerning what changes are necessary in the Roman Catholic Church with regard to both the nature of authority and how it is exercised. The book, which begins with an introductory essay by the editor, is divided into six parts. Part I takes up the topic of the history and nature of authority in four essays. Gerard Mannion maintains that there are different and clashing models of authority within Church. In a reappraisal of the concept of authority inspired by the philosopher Hobbes, Mannion contends that authority is derived from the community of the faithful as a whole 'with the democratic process playing its full part' (34). Those who exercise authority represent the Church. If the Church is to move away from a domineering model of authority and reassert its authority authentically, it must do so by a continuous hermeneutical engagement of the entire people of God. While most theologians would agree that the whole Church is not and cannot be passive with regard to the exercise of authority, some would, and should, dispute the idea that ecclesial authority is derived ultimately from the Church. Vatican II, after all, understood bishops as receiving their authority from Christ: sharing uniquely in his high priesthood and representing him to the Church. Undoubtedly, this authority can and is abused, but those who hold this authority and the entire Church must work for its authentic exercise.

Nicholas Lash's essay in Part I claims that, at the centre of the crisis of authority in Catholicism, is the subordination of education to governance. Governance should be seen as an aspect of teaching. 'Christianity exists to be a school of prayer and friendship' (60). Referring to both Augustine and Aquinas, Lash argues that teaching has to do with helping people to understand. Citing a favourite passage from Aquinas, Lash makes the point that good teachers rely on arguments that lead to understanding rather than answering questions by way of sheer authority. But teaching and understanding is a complicated business. Lash's reflections might have been rounded out by what Aquinas says about how important it is for a student to accept certain conceptions from his teacher as a matter of belief so that when he becomes learned he can understand them (SCG 3, q. 152). Augustine, of course, also speaks of believing in order to understand.

Historian Hugh Lawrence contributes two essays to Part I. The first essay is an historical account of spiritual authority and governance. The central thread of his inquiry is on the role of the whole Church choosing its own leaders. Lawrence writes from the perspective that history is a language of explanation and that Roman authority has always been fearful of the effects of historical criticism on the structures of the Church (37). Perhaps, though, this fear might be somewhat understandable given that historical criticism (even Lawrence's) is not philosophically or theologically neutral. Lawrence gives a very broad historical survey, mainly covering the patristic and medieval period. Sometimes this approach leads Lawrence to make some broad claims such as when he maintains that 'The medieval Church knew better how to enforce obedience than how to inspire love' (44). In his second essay, Lawrence addresses the subject of the role of ordination in governance. One of the central historical conclusions he draws is that both practice and canonical principle show that, while all ecclesial authority is a 'divine vicariate', governance originates not from ordination or sacramental status 'but under God from election by the ecclesial community' (80). With the reorientation of ecclesiology through Vatican II, Lawrence believes that 'The ordering of a community of equals involves principles of representation by the governed and the responsibility of rulers to the people' (81). He might have taken into account that the Second Vatican Council understands the ordained as representing more than simply the Church, and that it also spoke of a ministerial priesthood differing in essence from the common priesthood.

'The Role of the Faithful' is the subject of essays in Part II by Francis Sullivan and Richard Gaillardetz. Sullivan, in his usual thoroughness, examines the sense of faith, the sense of the faithful, and the consensus of the faithful, and asserts, rightly, that they are intimately related to one another. Gaillardetz's provocative essay takes up the question of the reception of doctrine. It is reviewed in greater detail below.

Part III explores the ecumenical dimensions of Church authority in three interesting essays, one by Nicholas Sagovsky and two by Paul McPartlan. Writing from the perspective of a strong communion ecclesiology, the latter emphasizes the fundamental theological categories for Church governance. He maintains that the present task before the Catholic Church today is to discover, together with the Orthodox and others, what sort of structure, collegiality and primacy 'best reflects the Trinitarian mystery and serves the Eucharist' (126). In the second essay, he writes about the differences between the Orthodox Churches, and admits that there are considerable differences, but that the faith is the same. One of the differences is a different vision of authority. Continuing his emphasis on the fundamental theological categories, McPartlan seems to think that the Orthodox have found authority to be less of a problem because they have been better at keeping to its *communio* context whereby authority should be understood as a relationship within and not outside the body of Christ. Still, the mystery of the Trinitarian life and the shared principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* require that Orthodox and Catholics translate their shared faith into a shared ecclesial life. Sagovsky's essay is about the ARCIC statements on ecclesial authority and is examined in some detail below.

Part IV, 'Organizational Culture and Authority', is comprised of two essays, one of which, by James Sweeney, is devoted to the experience of authority within the life of religious orders. Sweeney thinks that a major deconstruction has taken place in conceiving of religious life, authority, governance, and obedience. Positive and negative lessons can be learned from this experience but for this author the one indisputable thing is that 'authority can never be the same, now that it is under the exposure of critical awareness' (179). Sweeney stresses the need for a governance that recognizes the right to participate, the right to be heard, the right to review decisions and critique implementation. The essay by David McLoughlin measures what he believes is the actual lived experience of *communio* models of the Church against the rhetoric about those models in ecclesiastical documents. He is very critical of the latter, even those of Vatican II, which he claims did not 'clearly envision the bishop within the communion of his local church' (187). McLoughlin thinks that there are forces operating against the *communio* model, which bring forth real tensions. What, he asks, is the status of *communio* rhetoric when there are unreconciled members of the Church such as the divorced and remarried and women and married men called to ministry but ignored? (189). Of course such a question begs many other questions, not least among them is the question as to whether the lived and received teaching of the Church has anything to do with the bonds of communion which draw us into life of the Church.

The subject of marginalization and authority is addressed in Part V. Margaret Fraser's essay addresses the subject of how the voices of women might be heard and the problems she thinks exists for women in the area of language used for God, gender, and authority. She seems to have little to add to what has been written elsewhere on the subject by feminists authors. John O'Brien argues that there must be structures of authority in the Church that give privileged consideration to the experience of the poor, since there is a fundamental link between the liberation of the poor and the gospel. O'Brien is sympathetic to a reform of Church governance along the lines of a 'model based on the values and procedures of participative democracy' (219). The problem is an unsuspecting tendency to sideline the authority of the poor. 'The struggle of the poor is a privileged locus for discovering the designs of God for His/Her people' (230). Therefore the poor should have a privileged voice for transforming the governing structures of the Church from authoritarian to collegial ones.

The editor of this volume contributes a concluding essay which makes up Part VI. He points out that all of the contributors seem to agree that the Roman Catholic Church stands in need of reform with regard to how authority is understood and how it is exercised. He notes that there is such a long list of issues and that only an ecumenical council could address them all. He suggests that a 'radically reformed synod of bishops' (245) might prepare the way for the work of such as council. As with any collection of essays, the contributions vary in their depth and breadth. I shall limit the rest of my comments to what appears to be three of the volume's weightier essays.

The tone of the book is set by Hoose, in the introductory essay entitled 'Introducing the Main Issues'. In a highly critical view of how authority has been exercised in the Roman Catholic Church, especially within the last

century and a half, Hoose argues that discussions about authority in the Church have to do with two meanings of the word. The first involves ruling or governing and the second is the power to teach. He claims these two types of power have been intertwined and confused. Ruling or governing power originally conceived as service soon became overlaid with foreign ideas such as a platonic notion of hierarchical order. Thanks to what the author believes was an assimilation according to the model of a Roman magistrate, bishops became more like rulers than servants. This modification of governing power became confused with the power of teaching. Hoose thinks that, in this confusion, the power to teach has been exercised too often in a domineering way that has discouraged dialogue. Focusing his attention on the papacy, he sees Church teaching authority as needing to face the issues of so-called 'creeping infallibility' especially in matters of the natural moral law and the *ex sese* clause of Vatican I. He translates this famous passage as teaching that the papal definitions are irreformable of themselves and not from the 'assent' of the Church. He remarks that it appears from 'Vatican declarations' ... 'that members of the church are not asked if they agree with papal pronouncements. Rather they are told that they should assent to what the pope teaches because of the extraordinary power that he possesses' (7). In fact, the First Vatican Council did not say that irreformability was independent of the assent of the faithful but said that it was independent of the consent of the Church (*et non ex consensu ecclesiae*). On the other hand, the pope cannot define something that the Church has not believed and already assented to, for the 'deposit' he guards is nothing not already received by the Church. One is left to wonder whether Hoose's analysis would be different if were more aware of these distinctions. He also contends that it is an abuse to assert the charism of infallibility before there is dialogue and consensus. It can be asked, though, what counts as consensus for Hoose, and whether it includes the transmission of what the Church has believed down through the ages (diachronic consensus), which may be in danger of not being received and assimilated by the faithful today. For the Church to remain united in the truth there is required a communion in the truth that is both diachronic and synchronic.

In Part II, Richard Gaillardetz takes up the complicated question of the reception of doctrine. He examines how modern hermeneutics, literary theory, communication theory, and popular religion, all might be theologically appropriated in such a way as to enrich the theology of reception and an understanding of the nature of doctrinal teaching authority. Gaillardetz believes that the Church in the late Middle Ages moved away from an earlier theological understanding that saw reception as the Church actively appropriating elements of the Church's faith. Reception became to be understood and practiced according to a juridical notion of obedience: The magisterium teaches doctrines and the faithful obediently accept these doctrines. The author claims that a 'neo-scholastic model of the Church', dominant for 500 years, believed that God's revelation came 'from the Scriptures and certain authoritative organs within the Church' and that it 'viewed truth and revelation as coming down from God through the hierarchy to the faithful in a top-down fashion'(106). Questions can be raised as to whether this historical account does justice to the complex history of reception in the Church. For

one thing, the neo-scholastic 'two source theory', which Vatican II refused to endorse, saw Scripture and Tradition as the sources of revelation rather than Scripture and the magisterium.

Gaillardetz offers his own 'heuristic' model for thinking about the process of ecclesial reception. This model points to two moments of reception. In the first, the bishops receive the faith of the members as it is expressed in liturgy, devotions, art and living. In the second moment, the faithful receive the doctrinal formulations of the bishops. This reception is not simply an obediential reception, rather it is an active appropriation whereby the faithful contribute something positive to the Church whether in terms of a fresh remembrance that gives rise to new expressions in art, living, liturgies, and devotions. It is also claimed that his model is open to the possibility that official doctrinal formulations might not be received in the life of the Church (cf. 110).

Gaillardetz is right, certainly, about the fact that reception involves a positive and active appropriation by the faithful. Whether this process went completely underground during the late Middle Ages up until Vatican II is another matter. One can also ask how Gaillardetz's model would function in a time of doctrinal crisis; whether the model might have to be modified so that the magisterium's ability to make a binding judgment on matters of controversy would not evaporate and how the model might be squared with Vatican I's *ex sese* clause.

Nicholas Sagovsky's essay in Part III makes a compelling case for his claim that ARCIC statements on authority in the Church, 'have significant implications for the reform of Church governance' (129). The author, himself an Anglican member of ARCIC that produced the recent statement *The Gift of Authority*, acknowledges that the latter has been criticized for its portrayal of the 'ideal of the Church' rather than how 'real Churches' are actually run and governed. He admits that, while the ARCIC statements are 'transcendental and ideal', nevertheless they invite discussion of real and practical issues about how the Church is run. The statements offer not a blue print but a theological framework for helping to understand how the gift of authority might be received and how the art of governance might be cultivated. Sagovsky examines ARCIC statements on authority from 1976 and 1981, but spends most of his time on *The Gift of the Authority* (1999), which is the fullest ARCIC statement on authority.

He very effectively makes the point that 'that the way in which the Church is run is an expression of what is perceived to be its identity and its perceived identity is determined by how it is run' (129). *Gift*'s presentation of the nature of authority is tightly integrated with an ecclesiology of communion, but advances over earlier Statements because it shows the dialogical structure of divine authority – itself an explication of the fundamental idea of communion. *Gift* discusses this dialogical structure by speaking of God's 'Yes' to humanity and our 'Amen' to God (2 Cor 1:18-20). In Jesus Christ there is the concrete reality of God's 'Yes' to humanity and the 'Amen' of humanity in response. The authority of Jesus is twofold: he represents to humanity the will of the Father and he was the faithful witness and martyr, the Great Amen in whom all the promises of God are answered 'Yes'. The representative work of Jesus, whereby he represents the reconciling will of

God to humanity and humanity's reception of this reconciliation, is mediated and enacted as a contemporary reality in the life of the Church. It occurs when the gospel is authentically proclaimed and the sacraments are celebrated. These realities are overseen by the bishops who, charged with the ministry of memory, have the role of determining what is faithful to the apostolic tradition. The bishops are responsible for leading their Churches in an authentic 'Amen'. The reason for the exercise of the magisterial authority is to bring people to the fullness of participation in the divine life. 'The authority of the Church's teaching and proclamation is an expression of the authenticity of its life as a koinonia in the triune life of God' (139). According to Sagovsky, it is against this theological ideal that the governance of the Church by fallible people should be measured.

The strength and contribution of *Gift* to the contemporary discussion of ecclesial authority lies in its theological concept of authority rooted in the Scriptures and the Church's worship. It points the way to a sacramental understanding of authority that is ultimately Christological. Sagovsky's strength is to point out – something hinted at but not developed in *Gift* – that ecclesial authority finds its norm in the cross, which is the paradigm of 'God's appeal to humanity' – an appeal made in weakness and helplessness that does not force our assent but enables our free assent. He succeeds remarkably well in his task of showing how the ARCIC Statements provide a well-balanced, theological framework for the reform of Church governance. In doing so, he points out an important foundational element that some of the essays in the volume overlook.

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