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Ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι, μὴ ψυχῇ  
συναθλοῦντες τῇ πίστει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου  
Phil. 1:27

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### HUMANI GENERIS AND THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

In his recent Encyclical, *Humani generis*, our Holy Father cautions Catholic theologians against the danger of ignoring, or at least of not giving proper attention to, the teaching authority of the Church as exercised in the person of the Roman Pontiff. Not only must Catholic theologians, he warns, shun those errors in faith or morals which the Supreme Pontiff has pronounced heretical, but they must also show a greater respect for his authority when he treats of errors that approach heresy.

And although this sacred Office of Teacher in matters of faith and morals must be the proximate and universal criterion of truth for all theologians, since to it has been entrusted by Christ Our Lord the whole deposit of faith—Sacred Scripture and Divine Tradition—to be preserved, guarded, and interpreted, still the duty that is incumbent on the faithful to flee also those errors which more or less approach heresy, and accordingly “to keep also the constitutions and decrees by which such evil opinions are proscribed and forbidden by the Holy See” [Can. 1324], is sometimes as little known as if it did not exist.<sup>1</sup>

In developing this point His Holiness insists that greater authority must be attached to the Papal Encyclical Letters. Such documents must be heeded even if in them the Popes do not exercise the supreme power of their Teaching Authority. “For these matters are taught with the ordinary teaching authority, of which it is true to say: ‘He who heareth you, heareth Me’; and generally what is expounded and inculcated in Encyclical Letters already for other reasons appertains to Catholic doctrine.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Humani generis*, par. 18: “Et quamquam hoc sacrum Magisterium, in rebus fidei et morum, cuilibet theologo proxima et universalis veritatis norma esse debet, utpote cui Christus Dominus totum depositum fidei—Sacras nempe Litteras ac divinam ‘traditionem’—et custodiendum et tuendum et interpretandum concredidit, attamen officium, quo fideles tenentur illos fugere errores, qui ad haeresim plus minusve accedant, ideoque ‘etiam constitutiones et decreta servare, quibus pravae huiusmodi opiniones a Sancta Sede scriptae et prohibita sunt,’ nonnumquam ita ignoratur ac si non habeatur.”

<sup>2</sup> *Humani generis*, par. 20: “Magisterio enim ordinario haec docentur, de quo illud etiam valet: ‘Qui vos audit, me audit’ (Luc. 10, 16); ac plerumque quae in Encyclicis Litteris proponuntur et inculcantur, iam aliunde ad doctrinam catholicam pertinent.”

Consequently, when the Popes, in their official writings, pass judgment on disputed questions, those questions are no longer to be considered open to discussion among theologians. “But if the Supreme Pontiffs in their official documents purposely pass judgment on a matter up to that time under dispute, it is obvious that that matter, according to the mind and will of the same Pontiffs, cannot be any longer considered a question open to discussion among theologians.”<sup>3</sup>

The Holy Father then gives a specific example of what he means by this lack of proper respect for Papal Encyclicals when he condemns those theologians who, in matters concerning the constitution of the Church, give less credence to the precise words of the Encyclicals than they do to the obscure expressions they claim to have found in the writings of some ancient Church Fathers. These same theologians further err when they assume that the modern Papal decrees must be explained from, and in accordance with, the teachings found in early patristic writings.

What is expounded in the Encyclical Letters of the Roman Pontiffs concerning the nature and constitution of the Church is deliberately and habitually neglected by some with the idea of giving force to a certain vague notion which they profess to have found in the ancient Fathers, especially the Greeks. The Popes, they assert, do not wish to pass judgment on what is a matter of dispute among theologians, so recourse must be had to the early sources, and the recent constitutions and decrees of the Teaching Church must be explained from the writings of the ancients.<sup>4</sup>

These words of the Holy Father bring up the interesting question of the relative value of the writings of the Church Fathers. What authority, for example, do the patristic writings enjoy when

<sup>3</sup> *Humani generis*, par. 20: “Quodsi Summi Pontifices in actis suis de re hactenus controversa data opera sententiam ferunt, omnibus patet rem illam, secundum mentem ac voluntatem eorumdem Pontificum quaestionem liberae inter theologos disceptationis iam haberi non posse.”

<sup>4</sup> *Humani generis*, par. 18: “Quae in Romanorum Pontificum Encyclicis Litteris de indole et constitutione Ecclesiae exponuntur, a quibusdam consulto neglecti solent, ea quidem de causa ut praevaleat notio quaedam vaga, quam ex antiquis Patribus, praesertim graecis, haustam esse profitentur. Pontifices enim, ut ipsi dicitant, de his quae inter theologos disputantur indicare nolunt, itaque ad pristinos fontes redeundum est et ex antiquiorum scriptis recentiora Magisterii constitutiones ac decreta explicanda sunt.”

compared with Sacred Scripture, or with the decrees of the Popes and General Councils? What is the authority of one Church Father in relation to another, or of one Father who teaches a doctrine denied by many other Fathers? In a word, what position do the Church Fathers hold in the order of Divine Tradition?

The word *Traditio*, like the Latin *res* and *ratio*, is a term of multiple meaning, and consequently is often used vaguely in one or other of its various senses. In the terminology of theologians the word *Traditio* is used to indicate both whatever is delivered or transmitted, and the means by which it is transmitted. In the first sense, Tradition is the revealed word of God; in the second sense, it is the living Magisterium of the Church. Used in a very general way in the first sense, Tradition would include both the written and the unwritten word of God. Thus even Sacred Scripture, the written word of God, could be called a part of Divine Tradition. Theologians, however, distinguish between Sacred Scripture and Tradition, by restricting the meaning of Tradition in its objective sense to embrace only the unwritten word of God. Unwritten, however, in the sense that it was not written by the man to whom God revealed it, but was eventually put down in writing after it had been handed down orally for some time. There are, therefore, two sources of Divine Revelation, namely, Sacred Scripture and Tradition, with the Teaching Authority of the Church faithfully fulfilling the office of preserving, transmitting and interpreting both of them.

Those non-Catholics who accuse the Catholic Church of making accretions to revealed truth either fail to grasp or refuse to admit that the truth, revealed to His Church by Christ, was transmitted to succeeding generations both by written and unwritten traditions. Besides what was written (Sacred Scripture), there were many unwritten doctrines and customs (many of the "accretions" mentioned by the Protestants) communicated by Christ to His Apostles and by them transmitted orally to their successors, until finally they were put into writing.

These unwritten traditions eventually found expression both in the official documents of the Roman Pontiffs and the General Councils, and in the unofficial (for the most part) writings of the Church Fathers. It is true that not a few of the patristic writings may be considered official Church documents because they were composed by Fathers who were Roman Pontiffs, and, as such, held in their

persons the sacred Teaching Office of the Church. Besides, many of the Fathers were bishops, and thereby shared, as a group, in the authority of the Teaching Church. Their writings, too, could have an official character, especially if they had been written for discussions in General Councils. The majority of the patristic writings, however, are considered unofficial documents.

By Tradition, then, is meant, first of all, the unwritten traditions handed down by Christ to His Church; traditions which found expression in the Papal and conciliar decrees, and in the writings of the Fathers. An essential and vital part of Tradition is the living magistracy of the Church functioning as the guardian and interpreter of the unwritten traditions. It is, of course, natural that both the official and the unofficial documents of Tradition contain also the written word of God, for in the writings of Tradition appeal is always made to the inspired word of God as contained in Sacred Scripture.

In speaking of the authority of the Fathers another clarification is needed. Just what writers are included under the term "Fathers of the Church"? Migne, in his *Patrologiae cursus completus*, the most comprehensive collection of patristic texts we have, included in the Latin series of Fathers the Latin writers from Tertullian to Pope Innocent III (+ 1216), and in his Greek series, the Fathers who wrote in Greek, from Pope Clement I to the Greek bishops of the Council of Florence (1439). Modern Patrologists, on the other hand, are much more strict in their use of the term "Father of the Church." They limit this title to those holy champions of the Christian faith who lived within the first eight centuries of our era, who defended and explained the deposit of faith with their orthodox writings, and who were approved, at least implicitly, by the Church. These men have left behind them a vast literature in Greek and Latin; a literature that not only contains unwritten traditions given by Christ to His Apostles, but also remains the foundation stone upon which Christian civilization was built from the ruins of the old pagan Graeco-Roman culture.

Now the Fathers of the Church, understood in the stricter sense of the phrase, have ever been held in high esteem by Christians down through the centuries. The *Summa* of St. Thomas, for instance, is literally studded with patristic quotations, and his *Catena aurea* is nothing more than a collection of patristic interpretations

of the Gospels. Evidently the Scholastics attached great authority to the writings of the Fathers. But just how great is that authority?

When speaking of authority, as attributed to writers, we mean the moral power they have to elicit intellectual assent from their readers. This authority may be greater or less, or it may even be absolute, according to its power to produce in the mind of the reader a more or less probable agreement, or even a certain assent. The question now to be examined is whether the writings of the Fathers always produce certainty in the minds of the readers, or sometimes merely a state of probability.

Many non-Catholics attribute to the Church Fathers no greater authority than they do to other writers of early times. Their interest in the patristic writings is that of an antiquarian, who sees in these old documents no more than mere literary testimonials of an ancient age. Conversely, some Catholic theologians<sup>5</sup> have erred in the past by ascribing to the writings of the Fathers an authority equal to that of Sacred Scripture, while still others went to the Jansenistic extreme of preferring a single Father (St. Augustine) to the living Magisterium of the Church. It is precisely against this latter erroneous attitude that our Holy Father warns Catholic theologians when he says:

What is expounded in the Encyclical Letters of the Roman Pontiffs concerning the nature and constitution of the Church, is deliberately and habitually neglected by some with the idea of giving force to a certain vague notion which they profess to have found in the ancient Fathers, especially the Greeks.<sup>6</sup>

To avoid such errors and to evaluate properly the authority that should be given to the writings of the Fathers, there are certain practical rules a theologian may follow.

First of all, one should remember that when the patristic writings deal solely with matters of *natural sciences* (e.g., history, philosophy, biology, etc.) the convincing power of the Fathers is in direct proportion to their argumentative powers. In other words, the authority of the Fathers is no greater than the reasons they give for their assertions, according to the dictum: *Tantum valent, quantum probant.*

On the other hand, when the Fathers treat of matters concern-

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Abbot Fredegis of the ninth century.

<sup>6</sup> *Humani generis*, par. 18, ut *supra* in note 4.

ing *faith* or *morals*, the above-mentioned rule cannot be applied. In this case a distinction must be made between the more or less individual opinions of the Fathers and their unanimous agreement on a point of doctrine. The individual testimony of only one or a few of the Fathers is not sufficient in itself to produce certainty in the mind of the reader; it can and should produce a greater or less degree of probability according to the intellectual or ecclesiastical standing of the individual Father. The same must be said of the case where many Fathers give testimony on matters of faith or morals, while other Fathers hold a contrary or contradictory opinion. In all such cases the rules for the respective authority of individual Fathers, as will be given below, must be applied.

But when there is an agreement of the Fathers in matters of faith or morals, the well-known *consensus Patrum*, then their authority is greatest, and their testimony is enough to command intellectual assent and sufficient to produce a state of certainty in our minds.<sup>7</sup> This is so because, as a body in unanimous agreement, the Fathers bear witness to the teaching of the infallible Church. It should also be remembered that "so far as the Fathers of a certain period are all, or mostly, bishops, their consentient testimony in matters of faith or morals, is not only indirectly, but directly and in itself infallible, because they are the divinely appointed witnesses and the divinely instituted organ and channel of Tradition."<sup>8</sup> St. Augustine, the greatest of the Fathers, had this *consensus Patrum* in mind when he opposed the teaching of the earlier Fathers to that of Julianus, the Pelagian. By attacking the Fathers, he claimed, Julianus attacked the whole Church.<sup>9</sup>

In determining the *consensus* of the Fathers one cannot count heads and expect every single Father to be accounted for in the total summation of witnesses to a doctrine. Merely a moral agree-

<sup>7</sup> Cf. St. Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 28: "Quae tamen antiqua sanctorum Patrum consensio, non in omnibus divinae Legis quaestiuiculis, sed solum vel certe praecipue in Fidei Regula magno nobis studio et investiganda est, et sequenda."

<sup>8</sup> Schmid, *Manual of Patrology* (St. Louis: Herder, 1925), p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Contra Julianum Pelagianum*, II, 37: "Ubi tot sanctos doctores egregios atque memorabiles catholicae veritatis accusas, Irenaeum, Cyprianum, Retium, Olympium, Hilarium, Gregorium, Basilium, Ambrosium, Joannem, Innocentium, Hieronymum, caeterosque socios ac participes eorum, insuper et universam Christi Ecclesiam."

ment is sufficient, as for example, when the more illustrious Fathers expound a doctrine, and the other Fathers, for one reason or another, simply did not write about that specific doctrine, though they could have been aware of it. Their silence does not militate against the *consensus Patrum*.

While the *consensus Patrum* represents the mind of the Church in matters of faith and morals, it is particularly in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture that the authority of the *consensus* is most keenly felt. Popes and Councils have stated this fact most emphatically. St. Leo I, for instance, said: "It is not lawful to understand Scripture otherwise than the blessed Apostles and our Fathers have learned and taught."<sup>10</sup> The Council of Trent solemnly decreed:

Let no one, trusting in his own wisdom, in matters appertaining to faith or morals, and the building up of Christian doctrine, dare, by twisting the Sacred Scripture to his own sense, to interpret them against the sense which our Holy Mother Church has held and holds, whose office it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of Holy Scriptures, nor to interpret them against the unanimous consent of the Fathers.<sup>11</sup>

The Vatican Council later repeated this Tridentine decree:

In matters of faith or morals appertaining to the building up of Christian doctrine, that is to be held as the true sense of Scripture which Holy Mother Church has held and holds, whose office it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures; and, therefore, no one is allowed to interpret that same Sacred Scripture against this sense, or against the unanimous consent of the Fathers.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Epistola 82, 1: "Et cum ab evangelica apostolicaque doctrina ne uno quidem verbo liceat dissidere, aut de Scripturis divinis sapere, quam beati Apostoli et Patres nostri didicerunt atque docuerunt."

<sup>11</sup> *Concilium Tridentinum*, Sess. IV, Decretum de Editione et Usu Sacrorum Librorum: "Praeterea, ad coercenda petulantia ingenia, decernit ut nemo, suae prudentiae innixus, in rebus fidei et morum, ad aedificationem doctrinae christianae pertinentium, sacram Scripturam ad suos sensus contorquens, contra eum sensum, quem tenuit et tenet sancta Mater Ecclesia, cujus est judicare de vero sensu et interpretatione Scripturarum sanctarum, aut etiam contra unanimum consensum Patrum ipsam Scripturam sacram interpretari audeat."

<sup>12</sup> *Concilium Vaticanum*, Sess. III, c. 2, De Revelatione: "Nos, idem decretum (i.e., Tridentinum) renovantes, hanc illius mentem esse declaramus ut in rebus fidei et morum, ad aedificationem doctrinae christianae pertinen-

It should be noted that the binding authority of the Fathers, in their agreement on the interpretation of a Scriptural text, is limited to questions dealing with faith or morals.

So much for the *consensus Patrum*. Now what is to be said of the Fathers, considered individually and without reference to their unanimous agreement? Although the single Fathers (excepting those who were Roman Pontiffs), as individuals, were not infallible, and consequently their authority in matters of faith and morals is not in itself absolute, yet, in many instances, their authority is very great, and one would be rash to reject their opinions without just cause. This is particularly so if the Father presents the doctrine not merely as his own personal opinion, but as the general teaching of the whole Church. He very often does this by prefacing his words with such time-honored phrases as *Christus dixit*, *Apostoli tradiderunt*, *credimus* and *Ecclesia tenet*.

It goes without saying that the individual Fathers are not all of equal authority, for Holy Mother Church herself has honored some of them more than others, for instance, by conferring on some the added title of Doctor of the Church. To determine the various degrees of authority of the individual Fathers the following norms may be of some service:

- (1) The greater the holiness and learning of the Father, the greater is his authority (e.g., Saints Basil, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom).
- (2) The nearer a Father lived to Apostolic times, the greater is his authority (e.g., Saints Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna).
- (3) The greater the number of bishops with whom a Father came into contact, the higher is that Father's authority (e.g., Saints Irenaeus, Jerome, and Cyprian).
- (4) Of very high authority are those Fathers who successfully

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tium, is pro vero sensu sacrae Scripturae habendus sit, quem tenuit et tenet Sancta Mater Ecclesia, cujus est judicare de vero sensu et interpretatione Scripturarum sanctarum, atque ideo nemini licere contra hunc sensum, aut etiam contra unanimum consensum Patrum ipsam Scripturam sanctam interpretari."

defended and expertly expounded doctrines of the Church attacked by heretics (e.g., Saints Augustine, Athanasius, and Hilary); and those who were officially praised by the Church, or whose writings were publicly read and approved by the bishops in general council (e.g., Saints Augustine, Athanasius, and Leo I).

(5) Of the highest authority are those Fathers who were the bishops of Sees founded by the Apostles themselves (e.g., Saints Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna). Especially is this so of the Fathers who were the successors of Peter in the See of Rome, for to their *ex cathedra* utterances was attached the personal attribute of infallibility (e.g., Saints Leo I, Gregory I, and Damasus).

Because the authority of the individual Fathers varies, and because under the title of Church Fathers certain ecclesiastical writers are often quoted whose doctrine is sometimes far from reliable (e.g., Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius of Caesarea), theologians should be cautious in their use of the Fathers.

On the other hand, Catholic theologians, by keeping in mind this admonition, have a ready answer for those opponents of the Church who, to disprove certain Catholic doctrines, seek out the writings of the lesser known Fathers (or even of unreliable ancient ecclesiastical writers) and quote as favoring their teaching vague and obscure passages from such patristic writings. St. Vincent of Lerins warned the Christians of fifteen centuries ago of this deceit when he complained of those who "often seize upon some of the more involved writings of an ancient author, which, merely because of their obscurity, seem to stand in agreement with the new dogma these men propose."<sup>13</sup> The obscure passage of all patristic writings are to be explained in accordance with the clear statements found in the writings of Fathers of high authority, especially in the writings of those Fathers who form part of the *consensus Patrum*; and more especially must they be interpreted in accordance with the official pronouncements of the Teaching Church.

To sum up this evaluation of the Fathers, may it be said that the writings of the Fathers, since they were not inspired, are not on

<sup>13</sup> *Commonitorium*, 7: "Captant plerumque veteris cujuspian viri scripta paulo involutius edita, quae pro ipsa sui obscuritate dogmati suo quasi congruant."

the same level as the inspired Sacred Writings, but they are (when the *consensus Patrum* is had in matters of faith or morals) the surest guide for the proper interpretation of the Sacred Text. In their relationship to the living magistracy of the Church, the Fathers, in unanimous agreement, reflect the mind of the Church, but, as individuals, they are subject to the Teaching Authority. The Church has always shown a great respect for the Fathers, but, as someone has expressed it, "she judges them more than she is judged by them." It is precisely this truth that the Holy Father wishes to emphasize when, in the *Humani generis*, he warns theologians against setting up obscure statements from ancient patristic writings in opposition to the authoritative words of the Papal Encyclicals.

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#### DETACHMENT

Detachment, as we know from spiritual books, is a rare and high Christian virtue; a great Saint, St. Philip Neri, said that, if he had a dozen really detached men, he should be able to convert the world. To be detached is to be loosened from every tie which binds the soul to the earth, to be dependent on nothing sublunary, to lean on nothing temporal; it is to care simply nothing what other men choose to think or say of us, or do to us; to go about our own work, because it is our duty, as soldiers go to battle, without a care for the consequences; to account credit, honour, name, easy circumstances, comfort, human affections, just nothing at all, when any religious obligation involves the sacrifice of them. It is to be as reckless of all these goods of life on such occasions, as under ordinary circumstances we are lavish and wanton, if I must take an example, in our use of water,—or as we make a present of our words without grudging to friend or stranger,—or as we may get rid of wasps or flies or gnats, which trouble us, without any sort of compunction, without hesitation before the act, and without a second thought after it.

—John Henry Cardinal Newman, in Vol. III of the *Historical Sketches* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), p. 130.