Note on the Papacy as Object of Faith

The following passage of the Catechism of the Council of Trent sums up the old tradition on the difference between the Church's structure and the object of faith. "We believe the three Persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in such a way that we put our faith in them. Now, with a change in the way of speaking, we profess to believe the holy Church, not 'in' the holy Church. By this different manner of speech God, the creator of all, is distinguished from the creatures, and we refer to the divine goodness all the splendid gifts we have received which have been gathered in the Church."[1] The object of faith is God alone. Everything else is creaturely, even the Church and its institutions: as such they are accepted and believed, but we do not believe in them.

Among the many quotations with which du Lubac illustrates this point in his book on the structure of the Apostles' creed, one is particularly symbolic for the topic of this paper: Nos qui sumus vocamurque christiani, non in Petrum credimus, sed in quem credidit Petrus; Petri de Christo aedificati sermonibus, non carminibus venenati; nec decepti maleficiis, sed beneficiis ejus adjuti. Ille Petri magister Christus in doctrina, quae ad vitam ducit aeternam, ipse est magister noster. ("We who are and are called Christian, we do not believe in Peter, but in the one in whom Peter believed. We are built up by Peter's proclamations of Christ, we are not bewitched by his songs; we are not deceived by his curses but we are helped by his blessings. For this Christ, who is the teacher of Peter regarding the doctrine that leads to eternal life, is also our teacher.") Thus St. Augustine in the City of God.[2]

Neither the Church nor Peter or Peter's successors are objects of faith in the strict sense of the term. The only object of faith in the strict sense is God.

The Church relates to faith, not as to its object, but as to the nurturing milieu within which the faithful believe in God. This was implied in the formulation of the Apostles' creed: <u>Credo in Deum</u>.... But <u>Credo Ecclesiam</u>...I believe in God...I believe the Church.... This nurturing function of the Church was well indicated by Calvin who gave the following title to the first chapter of the fourth part of the <u>Institutes</u>: "Of the true Church, with which we must keep unity because she is the mother of all the faithful."[3]

One should therefore find another vocabulary than that of faith to designate the place of the Church and its institutions, including the papacy, in relation to the system of Christian beliefs. In a first approximation, one could distinguish between a direct and an indirect object.

What regards the structure of the Church does not belong to the direct object of faith, but to an indirect object, which, rather than what is believed, includes what is assumed as instruments and means of serving the Gospel. Or we could speak in terms of levels. The primary level of faith would regard the beliefs concerning God and his salvific activity in the Incarnation and the work of sanctification; a secondary level would regard the human elements which have been found to be indispensable or useful to the practical life of the community of the faithful.

A second approximation would seek the place of such institutional elements of the Church's structure in the "hierarchy of truths."[4] Then they would rank low, since they are not related primarily to the heart of the Gospel, identified with the doctrines of God and of the Incarnation. Furthermore, there must also be a hierarchy within these institutional elements. The papacy as an institutional feature has arrived relatively late in the Church's history. It has not been universally recognized, in that large sections of the Church, such as the Oriental Church, have acknowledged it reluctantly or not at all. There has been no clear unanimity in its interpretation by the diverse parts of the theological community:

different interpretations of the Petrine office have been held, v. gr. in Rome, in the East, among the Carolingians, in Conciliarism, in Gallicanism.... The mode of its exercise has varied drastically in terms of time (the papacy does not function in the same way at all times) and in terms of jurisdictional competence (the papacy does not function in the same way in regard to the Latin Church and to the Oriental Churches). All such qualifications, which limit the authority of the papacy would tend to assign to it a very low place among the hierarchy of the institutional elements of the Church's structure.

Counterbalancing this diachronic consideration, a synchronic view of the place of the papacy in the Church at a given moment may well see that it has had, at some periods, a high priority among the elements of the structures of the Church. At the time of the Council of Chalcedon, Pope Leo formulated the doctrine which was recognized by the Council as authentic. In the 19th century, attempting to stem the rise of rationalism, to maintain the freedom of the Church against anti-clerical governments and the Church's access to the means of education against the monopoly of higher education by the (State) Universities in countries influenced by Napoleon's reorganization of France, Vatican Council I focused its resistance on the symbolic figure of the pope.

In this case, three remarks are now in order. First, faith does not seem to be the best term to designate the way in which Catholics acknowledge the papacy's importance in the Church and for the Gospel. Such a word as trust, confidence, might be more appropriate and more in line with the reality: recognition of the papacy implies the assumption that, in the long run and despite its occasional failures, the papacy is trustworthy.

Second, since the papacy has in fact evolved considerably, it would be a mistake to select one point of this evolution as the paradigm for all other points.

Third, since the papacy has at no time functioned in the same way in relation to all the sections of the Church, it would be also a mistake to select one way of functioning as the paradigm for the whole Church.

Thus, the papacy appears as an ambiguous sociological reality, whose actual importance has varied both in time and in space with shifts of its position in relation to the whole Ecclesia.

One falls into a first mistake if the anathemas attached by Vatican I to its own formulation of papal authority are taken literally or absolutely. Anathema must mean different things in differing contexts. When the point in question stands among the lowest in the hierarchy of truths, the anathema must have also the weakest strength and the least effectiveness. One falls into another mistake if one sees the place of the papacy in the doctrine of Vatican I as being paradigmatic for all the past and all the future: it is paradigmatic for the conditions in which the Council was called and for which it legislated, not for the altered conditions of future times. One falls into a third mistake if the relationships between the pope and the Latin Church, as described in the Code of canon law, are made normative for all the Churches in communion with the bishop of Rome.

o o o

Further reflections are needed on the main aspects of the papacy highlighted by Vatican I (and Vatican II): the primacy as truly episcopal, the universal immediate jurisdiction, the infallibility.

If the papacy is not, strictly speaking, an object of faith, but an object of trust, the concept of primacy acquires its true meaning. For in this case primacy does not mean or imply domination but service. The exact point of the trust is that the bishop of Rome may be trusted, that he is, by the very fact of his position or office, expected to be trustful, to speak truthfully when he formulates doctrine for the sake of the Church's fidelity to the Gospel. He is to be

trusted precisely because his function is to set an example of pastoral care to all the pastors, and an example of faith, prayer and abandonment to divine providence to all the faithful. This is the task of each bishop in his diocese. It is also that of the pope, whose authority is described by Vatican I as truly episcopal in regard to the whole Church. This does not imply that the pope is a "bishop of bishops" or a bishop above other bishops. It implies that, insofar as he is a bishop like other bishops, the pope acquires a special function and significance as a model for all. The paradox of this position is not too different from the paradox of being a *primus inter pares*. If there is a *prima sedes* which *a nemine judicatur*, whose judgement falls into no one's jurisdiction, this must be because, if the pope fails, he so subverts the intended order of the Church that the whole Church must then reject him.

Universal immediate jurisdiction has not always been claimed by or for the papacy. By endorsing the concept, Vatican I led to its culmination a movement which had been important in giving effectiveness to the Gregorian reform. Specifically, in the context of the 19th century, it dealt the death blow to Gallicanism. Since, however, this universal immediate jurisdiction, as conceived at Vatican I, is in harmony with the immediate jurisdiction of bishops in their diocese and with the authority of other judicatories, such as patriarchates, the concept must be qualified in two ways. On the one hand, one should say that the pope has such a universal, immediate jurisdiction only insofar as this does not detract from the jurisdiction of the other lawful authorities in the Church. On the other, one must add that, lest the faithful be burdened with undue anxieties, and on the principle, Odiosa sunt restringenda, the pope has such a jurisdiction only to the extent that it is required for the good of the Church. In other words, in normal times and in the absence of a special emergency, this jurisdiction is not operative. It is a doctrine for extreme cases, which are, by their very nature, expected to be rare. However, in the day to day life of the

Church, since Vatican I, immediate universal jurisdiction has come to mean that
it is the primate who has the overall responsibility of regulating such things
as liturgy or the administration of the sacraments, insofar as these touch on the
unanimity and the catholicity of the whole Church, each bishop having an analogous
responsibility as regards the cohesiveness of his local Church. It also means
that from time to time the pope issues an encyclical as an exhortation or **instruc**
tion for the whole Church. But encyclicals are recent. Their initiator is
Gregory XVI (1831-1846) who, as Mauro Cappellari, had applied to the Church's
structure the categories of the Politics of Aristotle and identified the Church
with its governmental structure.⁶ Thus, encyclicals came into being as means of
the papal care of all the Churches in an ultramontanist conception of papal
authority, and may well disappear with the eventual demise of this conception.

o o o

Infallibility presents a special problem. For it does not only refer to the
nature and exercise of authority; it also refers to the nature of the formulation
of doctrine. Assertions about authority must be able to fit into the nature of
the Christian community, since authority must always be of a kind that is com-
patible with the nature of the Christian community. But assertions about the
formulation of doctrine must be able to fit into the nature of discourse, that
is, ultimately, into the structure of language.

As an assertion about authority, the doctrine of papal infallibility tries
to answer the question: Who is able to speak for the Church? It expresses the
confidence that in times of emergency some organ must be able to speak for the
Church in a recognizable manner so that both the faithful and the unbelievers
know the Christian stance. Strictly speaking, this identifies infallibility with
primacy in public witness. It says no more than what was said above about the
primacy, but it says it in relation to the forceful assertion and defense of the

Christian position in periods of trouble and uncertainty, when circumstances demand that the Church speak out clearly and courageously.

As an assertion about the formulation of doctrine, papal infallibility, as described at Vatican I, implies the possibility, for the Ecumenical Council and for the Bishop of Rome speaking _ex cathedra_, of formulating propositions that are irreformable. This irreformability is to be understood as implying not that such propositions cannot be reworded and improved upon, but that the truth which they express, however partial it may be, is in keeping with the Christian Revelation and therefore must not be denied by the faithful. The careful description by Vatican I of the conditions in which the bishop of Rome speaks _ex cathedra_ implies the idea of an antecedent certainty that, when he so speaks, he truly formulates the doctrines of the Christian Revelation.

Such an approach to formulas of faith raises a linguistic problem which may be illustrated with this intriguing passage from Fénelon:

> ...la tradition de la doctrine...n'est que le fait de la transmission de la parole selon les règles de la grammaire. Suivant cette idée, la tradition consiste donc toute entière dans l'action continuelle de l'Eglise, qui garde inviolablement les règles de la grammaire, pour rejeter selon la promesse la nouveauté profane, et pour admettre la forme saine dans la transmission de la parole non écrite. Cette transmission ou tradition, qui est la fonction essentielle du corps des pasteurs, se réduit donc a suivre infailliblement les règles de la grammaire, et même de la logique, pour exprimer en termes propres le dogme révélé et pour reprendre quiconque le contredit.**7**

Were Fénelon right, infallibility, whether of the Church, of the Council, or of the pope, would amount to a divine protection in the use of grammar and logic when a dogmatic definition is being formulated. This presupposes a static concept of grammar and a view of the nature of language that are not compatible with

contemporary linguistics. Presumably, the conception of grammar and language held by the bishops of Vatican I had not much evolved from that of Fenelon.

Today, infallibility in formulating doctrine raises the following question: Can infallibility - or, if one prefers, the irreformability which Vatican I associates with doctrines defined by the infallible magisterium - be predicated of any formulation? In my book, La Théologie parmi les sciences humaines; in a previous paper, Infallibility: a structural analysis; and in my Graymoor paper, The papacy and Christian Symbolism, I have shown - at least to my satisfaction - that structural linguistics makes such a predication impossible.

But I have also indicated the positive value of the doctrine of infallibility. Namely, it expresses the trust that the Church and the organs that speak for the Church, which include, in rare circumstances, the Ecumenical Council and the pope, may be trusted to speak the truth which is necessary to the transmission of the Gospel. In this perspective, the task of Vatican I was to at empt to delimit the conditions in which such a trust can reasonably be placed in the bishop of Rome. We are thus brought back to the notion of trust. Belief in the infallibility of the Church, the Council or the pope, is neither antecedent faith in what they will say nor uncritical assent to what they **have** said. It is trust that, when the time comes for an authentic formulation of Christian doctrine, they will speak with the intention of speaking the truth and they will do their utmost to make sure that they do speak the truth. Such a conception of infallibility absolves no one from critically studying the formulations of doctrine eventually defined and to point out their inadequacies.

o o o

This conception of infallibility may not be exactly that of Pope Paul VI. Yet some of Pope Paul's recent statements indicate a growing awareness of the demands that language places on the Catholic formulation of faith.

On the 4th of November 1975, speaking to 400 Italian students, the pope spoke on "the 'how' of the presentation of the faith" which includes "two essential and indivisible moments: the content and the form of evangelization." On the content, the pope affirms the "identity and the homogeneous transmission of the revealed truth: always equal to itself, it is progressively enriched through the centuries through the studies, experiences, cultures, of those who receive it and transmit it to the following generations." On the form, the pope indicates four attitudes: "There are those who, being discouraged, keep quiet, like the mute prophet who does not dare to proclaim the Word of God.... There are those who repeat the deposit textually, with no pedagogical effort of language, with no explanation.... There are those who alter the content of the Gospel, supposedly to adapt it to the conditions of contemporary culture or to mentalities and expressions corresponding to provisional fashions. Finally, there are those - and this is the true apostolate - who announce the Gospel in their word and above all in their life...they embody the truth which they announce.... It then becomes an imitable and fascinating reality implying emulation and example...."[9]

What is most interesting in this text is that the truth of the Gospel is not presented as a formula, but as a reality embodied in a life.

On the 14th of November, speaking to one hundred Italian bishops, Paul VI returned to this topic. This time, after reminding the bishops of their duty to "watch over the deposit, which we have to transmit in all its splendor and integrity, such as it comes to us from the centuries," he insisted on aggiornamento. On the one hand, "the idea, the content...must be protected from the mania to relativize everything." On the other, "we must know how to relativize the language, that it be clear and enlightening, profound and limpid, modern and personal, and that it may say something to all."[10] Admittedly, Pope Paul speaks explicitly about the aggiornamento of the catechetical or pastoral presentation of the faith. But from the standpoint of the necessarily relative structure of language, there

is no difference between the relativity of catechetical language and the relativity of infallible definitions. Both are relative to the structure of the language in which they are formulated; and they acquire different connotations from the different horizons within which they are spoken. The necessity to "relativize" the language of the kerygma arises from the conditioned nature of all language.

In these conditions, what the definition of infallibility ultimately expresses is trust in the Holy Spirit, who watches over the necessarily and always fallible formulations of faith, so that through them and in spite of them, the faithful may be confident that they are being led into all the truth.

I had written the preceding pages when I read the apostolic exhortation, _Evangelii nuntiandi_, of December 8, 1975. This is a remarkable document for its openness to the contemporary problems of evangelisation. It even clearly formulates the problem of the formulation of doctrine in language that should be adapted, not only to the universality of the Catholic Church, but also to the particularity of local Churches. The exhortation sees it as the special task of the particular Churches "to assimilate the essence of the Gospel message, to transpose it, without the least betrayal of its essential truth, in the language that these people understand, and then to announce it in this language." The text takes 'language' in a broad sense, "less at the semantic or literary level than at the level one may call anthropological and cultural." As one should remark, the cultural-anthropological level cannot be fully separated from the semantic-literary level of language. Doctrine is expressed in and for diverse cultures insofar as the language of its proclamation and formulation speaks to these cultures. Two rather different concerns must be kept together. The exhortation expresses this point quite well:

> Evangelisation loses much of its force and efficacy if it does
> not take into consideration the concrete people to whom it is
> addressed, if it does not use the language, the signs and the
> symbols of this people, if it does not respond to the questions
> asked, if it does not connect with life. But evangelisation runs
> the danger of losing its soul and vanishing, if its content is
> emptied out or altered in its nature under pretense of
> translation (n. 63)[11]

However, the real problem is not only one of translation into other
languages and cultures. It is already one of expression into any language
and culture. Language can express the "essence of truth" only through
the signs and symbols of concrete peoples. This is true of the
contemporary proclamation of the Gospel in the many languages and
cultures of the world by the particular Churches. But it is also true
of the definitions of faith made in a selected language and culture for
the sake of the universal Church. It is precisely this point which
demands a qualification of the notion of infallibility in keeping with
the limits of language, which expresses universal essences only through
particular thought-forms. What is universal in all languages can only be
a meta-language still to be discovered. But it is not at this level
that formulations of doctrine, or of anything else, are made. What
is then left of the notion of infallibility can be scarcely more than
trust in the Spirit's protection and guidance of the Church's faith and
of the organs which formulate this faith. The Spirit may be said to be
infallible in that he infallibly reaches his goals, and we trust him to
guide the Church.

<p style="text-align:center">+   +   +</p>

The answer to the problem faced by this paper may now be formulated.
The papacy is an object of faith neither in its primacy nor in regard
to the pope's jurisdiction or in regard to papal infallibility. In the
Roman Catholic Communion, the papacy belongs among the elements of the

Church's structure that have a nurturing function in regard to the guardianship and the teaching of the faith. Thus it is an object of trust, but the trust is not in the papacy or the pope, it is in the Holy Spirit. One trusts that the Spirit will use the Petrine office for the sake of the Gospel and the good of the faithful, without letting anyone be bewitched by the songs of Peter or deceived by his curses.

Methodist Theological School
Delaware, Ohio

Georges Tavard

1. Catechismus Romanus, part I, ch. X, n. XXII.

2. De Civitate Dei, bk XVIII, ch. 53, n. 1. See Henri de Lubac: La Foi Chrétienne. Essai sur la structure du Symbole des Apôtres. Paris, 1969.

3. L'Institution chrétienne, part IV, ch. 1.

4. Tavard: Hierarchia veritatum. A Preliminary Investigation (Theological Studies, vol. 32, n. 2, June 1971, p. 278-289). On what follows, see Papal Primacy and the Universal Church,

5. Canon 1556.

6. Il Triunfo della S. Sede e della Chiesa, 1799, cited in Yves Congar: L'Eglise, de saint Augustin à l'Epoque Moderne, Paris, 1970, p. 414.

7. Ordonnance et instruction sur le cas de conscience, 1702, cited in Tavard: La Tradition au XVIIe siècle, Paris, 1969, p.231.

8. La Théologie parmi les Sciences Humaines, Paris, 1975: The Papacy and Christian Symbolism (Journal of Ecumenical Studies,

9. Documentation Catholique, Paris, 1975, n.21, p. 1023.

10. Ditto, p. 1024.

11. Ditto, 1976, n.1, p. 14.