

## A CHURCH WITH AUTHORITY

By the end of the second century, the Christian Church presents itself as an institution with a clearly defined system of authority based mainly on its sacred Scriptures, its creed, and its hierarchy of bishop, priest, and deacon.

The question of how this system developed constitutes one of the most controverted chapters in the history of the Church.

Whether or not we accept the view that Jesus himself founded the Church and conferred authority over it on his twelve apostles, history clearly shows that from the beginning the first believers formed a tightly knit community and were conscious of being members of a unique fellowship—still within Israel indeed but with a distinct sense of identity due to their belief in the risen Jesus. This awareness soon found expression in the terms they used of themselves: They called themselves the saints, the elect, the Church of God, the true remnant of Israel, the new Israel.

Profoundly conscious, as they were, that it was the resurrection of Jesus and not some human agency that created the Church, they saw their fellowship as a gift of the Spirit, a miraculous act of God. This sense of the supernatural origin of the Church is powerfully conveyed

by Paul, who thought of the Church as the new Eve-the spouse of Christ. Paul also spoke of the Church as Christ's body; as a farm or garden planted and watered by the apostles; as a building erected by the apostles on the foundation of Jesus Christ; and as the temple of God.

This unique Christ-centered self-image of the early Church is revealed clearly in its two most important rituals. First was the Eucharist, which was celebrated by repeating Christ's words at the last Supper over bread and wine in obedience to his command to remember him and in the firm conviction that he was present as their risen Lord. A wealth of meaning was attached to this simple rite: It was the proclamation of the Lord "until he comes"; it was a sharing in his body and blood; it was a sacrifice, the re-creation of Christ's sacrifice which inaugurated a new covenant between God and man. The second act was the initiation rite of baptism, a cleansing with water; this was regarded as an essential part of conversion to Christ and admission to the community.

All of this shows a distinct sense of the Church's sense of supernatural oneness in Christ-but little idea of organization. The traditional Catholic view of the organization of the Church is that Jesus himself organized it by appointing the twelve apostles and giving them authority to assume control of the Church after his death.

This is the picture presupposed and developed by Luke particularly; but many scholars, including some Catholic ones, view this conception as a retrojection of the later developed Church system into the primitive era. To mention only one objection to the traditional view: If the twelve apostles were put in charge by Jesus, why do they so completely disappear from the subsequent history of the Church?

Many historians, therefore, prefer the theory that the primitive Church only slowly organized itself and shaped its system of authority in response to a variety of situations that existed in different localities. And in their view it only gradually settled everywhere on the three-tiered structure-bishop, priest, and deacon-as the one most conducive to its mission.

Those who favor this developmental approach interpret Paul, the earliest witness, in this sense. They hold that for Paul the Spirit is the one who organizes the community; rule by the Spirit means that love is the unifying and organizing force, and freedom is its characteristic quality. The various ministries needed to carry on and order the community are given directly by the Spirit. And Paul lists these in his Epistle to the Corinthians: "God has given the first place to apostles, the second to prophets, the third to teachers· after them miracles, and

after them the gift of healing; helpers, good leaders, those with many languages,"!

Note that Paul does not limit apostleship to the original twelve; an apostle for Paul was anyone who had personally been commissioned to preach by the risen Jesus and, as a witness to the resurrection, authorized to found and lead churches.<sup>2</sup> He was to see to their right ordering and command the obedience of the community; but he exercised his authority in fellowship with all the other members of the community. In this sense, the Church was founded on the apostolic ministry and witness. As a ministry of personal witness based on the Lord's commission, the apostolate was a unique and unrepeatable office.

Note also that while Paul singles out prophecy and teaching as the noblest gifts, he does not envisage them in a hierarchical order but rather regards all the various ministries working of miracles, healing, helping, administering, speaking in tongues—as a loosely connected set that complement each other.

As to the order of the universal church, he stresses the importance of communion with the other apostles and with Jerusalem, and he is willing to recognize a certain primacy of the mother Church. But this implied "no sort of subordination of his own authority and person to any other

of supposedly higher status. The decisive event that determined Paul's mission, his Gospel, was meeting Christ on the Damascus road, and it was because of this that even the leading apostles at Jerusalem had to recognize his authority. It is clear, however, that for Paul it was his "Gospel" that mattered, not personal recognition for its own sake. And he would not yield an inch on the principle of the freedom from the Law involved in the Gospel. Paul's system of charismatic leadership worked all right as long as the Church lived in expectation of the immediate end of the world and the second coming of Jesus, and as long as the original apostles were still alive who were able to guarantee the veracity of the oral tradition about Jesus. But two things happened that necessitated a change: First, the expectation of the End faded as awareness grew that the Church was destined to continue in history, perhaps for a long time. Second, death began to carry off the apostles. So the Church was faced with the problem of how to stay in touch with its origins and preserve its unity and continuity with the original apostolic witness. There was a real danger of its tradition being swamped in a mass of conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Christ's life and resurrection. A group called the Gnostics, for instance, put forth an interpretation of Jesus that subverted most of the basic doctrines of the Church: Christ for them was not a

true man but a particle of divinity who had merely assumed a human costume. One of their leaders, Marcion, rejected the Old Testament as the work of an evil, inferior demigod and professed belief only in Paul's writings. To meet this crisis, a threefold solution was gradually devised: A specially commissioned ministry was established; an authoritative list of apostolic writings was issued and a rule of faith or creed was drawn up.

The specially commissioned ministry was based on a system of governance by elders and deacons such as had apparently prevailed in some churches from the beginning (at Jerusalem, for example). In this system unlike Paul's it was not the Spirit who conferred office; office was conferred by formal appointment, although it was presumed that the appointee was specially endowed with the gift of the Spirit. The recipient was ordained to his office by the laying on of hands. This system is already found in the pastoral epistles where Timothy and Titus have been appointed to the office of elder; they are to choose reliable men to succeed them and these in turn will choose others. The First Epistle of Peter also shows such a system already in operation with a definitively fixed circle of presbyters or elders engaged in an orderly ministry, though as yet there is no distinction between

clergy and laity. The whole Church is called a royal Priesthood.

An important stage in this development was reached around A.D. 96, when the apostolic origin of this presbyteral system was asserted in the First Epistle of Clement. This was a letter written by the Roman Church to the Church in Corinth in an effort to heal a schism there that occurred when a group of elders were deposed. Clement urged their restoration to authority by arguing that the deposed elders stood in due succession from the apostles. But as is shown by a Syrian catechetical manual, the *Didache*, dating probably from the end of the first century, the system of elders was still not universal. In this work prophets and teachers were still regarded as exercising the most important ministries. The manual reflects, however, a state of transition to the institutional type of Church organization, for it instructs the congregation to elect bishops and deacons if prophets and teachers are in short supply.

This term "bishop" was originally a secular Greek expression, *episkopos*, meaning supervisor or overseer. It gradually came into Church usage and was nearly synonymous at first with the word for elder, presbyter. These elders or bishops governed the churches collectively at first. But gradually one man took over the power and

concentrated the various ministries in his hands. He was now called "bishop" to distinguish him from the presbyters, who were his subordinates.

This system-the monarchical episcopate-is already clearly enunciated at the end of the first century in the letters of Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, who wrote while on his way to trial and eventual martyrdom in Rome. For Ignatius the bishop is the focal point of the congregation; all important functions are vested in him; he alone has the right to lead public worship and administer the sacraments. His authority is without limits, but it is to be completely at the service of the community.

By 150 or 160 this system of authority was established practically everywhere. Four factors seem to account for its triumph. First, there was a need for one presbyter-the senior of the college, often-to represent Christ at the Eucharist; the same one would often be deputed to ordain as well, and he gradually claimed this power by right. Second, one person would be charged normally with carrying on correspondence with the other churches. Third, one person would often be chosen to represent a church at a general gathering. Fourth, in view of the Gnostic disturbance, congregations realized the value of having a single person as a focus of unity and as an authoritative doctrinal spokesman.

The authority of this monarchical bishop as a guarantor of the oral tradition was based on the claim that he stood in legitimate succession in a line reaching back to the apostles themselves. The implication was that his teaching would therefore be in conformity with his predecessors. This concept was given its classic form by Irenaeus around A.d. 185. Irenaeus used Rome as the pre-eminent example of a church whose fidelity to the original deposit of faith was guaranteed by the fact that its bishops were the direct successors of Peter and Paul; moreover, they spoke in agreement with the bishops of other sees who were also successors of apostles.

The second measure taken by the Church to guarantee the integrity of its tradition and safeguard its identity with the Church of the Apostles was its decision to recognize a certain limited body of writings as "Scripture." This Canon of the New Testament was supposed to contain the authentic tradition about Jesus. The decision to set these writings apart as sacred was a momentous one, for it meant that the Church would forever be subject to them as an absolute norm of its life and faith.

This canon was based on a consensus of the Church that all the books listed were associated with an apostle in some way and were orthodox in doctrine. Judgment about the

authenticity of the canonical writings was based on the idea that the tradition of the Church in this matter was trustworthy in general, although it could be wrong in detail. The scholars did not accept the tradition uncritically; they did their best to verify whether the books in question were actually written by apostles or by those in touch with apostles. As long as there was uncertainty about apostolic authorship, there was reluctance to accept books as canonical. Thus St. John's Gospel was not readily accepted at first, and it was only after Irenaeus gave what was thought sufficient proof of its authorship by John that its canonicity was established. The same thing occurred with the Epistle to the Hebrews, which writers in the Western churches refused to quote for nearly two hundred years.

The interplay of the living Church and the written Scriptures—a constant feature of Christian history—was thus in operation from the start. The living community was constantly checked and controlled by the basic testimony of the apostle.

But at the same time the written records were checked and controlled by the living community—as one scholar has written, "simply because by that time it contained within it, or among its leaders, a sufficiently firm and uniform tradition to constitute it corporately a preserver of tradition.

The Canon was virtually complete by the early decades of the second century, with such exceptions as mentioned; but it was not definitely finalized in the West until 380-90, and even later in the East.

The third means used by the Church to uphold its authority and safeguard orthodoxy was by the formulation of a creed, the "rule of faith," a compendium of the main teachings of the bishops. The earliest example of such a rule is found in the writings of Irenaeus. It asserts the Church's faith in one God, the Father and Creator of all things; in the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus; and in the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets were inspired to foretell the salvation events connected with the ministry of Jesus Christ.

In this threefold manner—through bishops claiming to be successors of the apostles, through a Canon of Scripture, and through an authoritative creed—the Church erected a durable structure of authority, a framework of steel that has enabled it to meet every conceivable crisis.

There still remains the question of how the individual churches were related to one another. From the beginning they were deeply conscious of their unity and oneness in Jesus Christ, and this sense of unity was fostered by the great amount of intercourse that took place among them. The missionaries and their converts kept the churches in

touch with each other by frequent visits. It was only slowly and by degrees, however, that these informal and personal relations were translated into institutional and organizational ones.

The first steps in this direction occurred, it seems, when the bishops of a particular region began to meet in synod to discuss their common problems and adopt common solutions. The first synod of which we have knowledge took place in Asia between 160 and 175. Gradually certain churches assumed authority over other churches. Some of them acquired so-called metropolitan status, which elevated them over the churches of a province, while others—Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, to be specific—acquired suprametropolitan status, by which they exercised a primacy over these metropolitan churches. Political factors were mainly responsible for these differentiations, the political preponderance of a town inevitably securing its ecclesiastical preponderance. So the bishop of the capital of a Roman province was granted a certain superiority over the other bishops of that province; he had the right to convoke synods and to preside over the debates. The fourth canon of the Council of Nicaea (325) officially sanctioned this principle when it recognized the primacy of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch.

However, over and above sheer political preponderance, Rome enjoyed certain attributes that raised it above all the other churches and destined it for a unique role as a center of Church unity. First, it could claim special status as the see of the apostles Peter and Paul. Irenaeus cited Rome as the preeminent example of his principle of apostolic succession: "When the Blessed Apostles [Peter and Paul] had founded and built up the Church, they handed over the ministry of the Episcopate to Linus."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Irenaeus concluded, all the other churches should agree with Rome as an unquestioned channel of pure apostolic doctrine. Second, as the capital of the Empire, it attracted churchmen of rival schools of thought who were extremely desirous of having the support of the bishop of Rome. Third, it became a very wealthy church, noted for its munificent charity; its willingness to be of assistance to other churches around the world considerably enhanced its influence.