

## NOTES

### AUTHORITY, CONNATURAL KNOWLEDGE, AND THE SPONTANEOUS JUDGMENT OF THE FAITHFUL

The question of the authentic (official but noninfallible) teaching authority of the Church has been simmering for some years now; with the Encyclical *Humanae vitae* the pot is boiling. This discussion raises another question which is far too limited to solve the present problem but does have a bearing on our current situation and has theological implications reaching beyond the immediate present.

A concrete example will help make the question clear. Several years ago a theologically illiterate grandmother asked what all this discussion of birth control was about. After hearing an explanation of the two conflicting positions she said: "I lived a happy married life according to the teaching of Pius XI and Pius XII. But I'm convinced that the 'more liberal' teaching is what Christ wants." This devout woman in her sixties, who had lived twenty years of married life strictly according to *Casti connubii* without complaint, who then lived twenty years as a widow (in a manner worthy of any *mulier sancta nec virgo nec martyr*), not only failed to find such a "liberal" position monstrous; she could say most simply and with no trace of resentment: "I've always felt that was right."

The question this article poses and attempts to answer in a sketchy way is this: Does such a conviction, such a spontaneous judgment of a loyal and faithful Catholic, have any theological weight? Obviously one sparrow does not make a spring; but when this phenomenon is multiplied so that we can speak of a considerable number of such faithful Catholics who share this spontaneous moral judgment, does such a body of theologically unarticulated conviction have a genuine importance for serious theological speculation?<sup>1</sup>

The question only becomes a genuine problem when such conviction stands in opposition to an authoritative teaching of the Church. We want to show in this article why such "opinion" and spontaneous moral judgment does have theological weight, even in such a situation.

This does not, of course, imply that the bearers of the Church's authority should back down in the face of all opposition of the faithful. Nor does it suggest that we replace theological speculation with opinion polls. It does

<sup>1</sup> Such data can also take the less radical form of bewilderment and the inability to comprehend the moral evil of a concrete act. Implicit in such bewilderment is the spontaneous judgment that such an act is not intrinsically evil.

mean that such a conviction among the faithful represents a theological datum which deserves serious consideration and not an attitude of suspicion; it means that such a conviction should be considered one of the "lights" of moral speculation.

Since this question cannot be handled in a vacuum and has an essential relationship to the question of the authentic teaching authority of the Church, this latter question will have to be handled by way of an introduction. The following remarks on the Church's authentic teaching authority are very consciously one-sided and lack the balance that a full treatment of the question deserves.<sup>2</sup> This seems justified, however, in the present context: our goal in touching on this topic is to clear the ground for the central remarks on the positive value of the spontaneous moral judgment of the faithful.

#### AUTHENTIC TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

All of the following remarks on the official teaching authority of the Church deal with only one instance of this authority: the official but fallible teaching authority. We will make no attempt to show the intrinsic necessity and absolute importance of such fallible but genuine authority in the Church. This is taken for granted and stands beyond all question. Nothing in this article should be interpreted as opposing in any way the importance and value of such authority.

The ultimate purpose of such authority is to help individuals overcome their own clouded vision (clouded by one-sidedness and narrowness in all of its forms—whether caused by personal guilt or prepersonal factors or both), so that they can grasp in greater clarity the law of Christ. This means that the ultimate basis for such authority is insight; such authority presupposes that the instance and bearer of such authority has a position from which Christ's law is more clearly and deeply grasped. Based on this deeper insight, the Church can speak authoritatively. The basis of such superior insight is precisely the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the Church herself distinguishes between her fallible and her infallible teaching authority means that she does not always and in

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent treatment of this question in far more detail, see Bruno Schüller, "Bemerkungen zur authentischen Verkündigung des kirchlichen Lehramts," *Theologie und Philosophie* 4 (1967) 534–51. While the first half of this present article refers frequently to Schüller, it does not reflect the balance of his treatment.

<sup>3</sup> See Schüller, *ibid.*, p. 536; also Schüller, "Die Autorität der Kirche und die Gewissensfreiheit der Gläubigen," *Der Mönchseelsorger*, Sept.–Oct., 1966, pp. 131 f.

every instance of her teaching possess this better vantage point.<sup>4</sup> The guidance of the Holy Spirit in those instances where the Church teaches authentically but not infallibly does not guarantee this superior vantage point in absolutely every instance—not even in all matters of grave importance;<sup>5</sup> nor even in every instance where the Church feels confident that she possesses this superior insight and teaches accordingly.<sup>6</sup>

It follows, then, that the role of such authentic teaching authority is subsidiary, and only necessary and meaningful for the individual when he himself lacks the vantage point from which he could grasp the truth in question. Such teaching authority would be superfluous if every individual were constantly able, on the basis of his own insight, to grasp the law of Christ in all of its dimensions. Such is obviously not the case and never will be.<sup>7</sup> But this means that such authority is superfluous in any given concrete situation where an individual has already reached the vantage point from which he can grasp the truth. Three remarks are in order here as a commentary on these last sentences.

1) Even where this means that an individual might be put in a situation of conflict with one concrete instance of authentic authority's teaching, it does not mean that the individual has reached this superior insight independent of or in opposition to such authority *taken as a whole*. It can be assumed that it is precisely his total relation to the truth which this authority has fundamentally opened to him that gives him his vantage point.

2) Presupposing that the individual does enjoy the more valid insight in

<sup>4</sup>That the Church dares to teach in such situations where she does not possess an infallible guarantee of the correctness of her teaching is not only allowed; it is her duty. (Such behavior would only be irresponsible when it amounts to "shooting from the hip.") One could only wish that the language in which such teaching is presented would more genuinely reflect the quality of such fallible authority.

<sup>5</sup>Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 43: "Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission" (tr. Abbott-Gallagher, *The Documents of Vatican II* [New York, 1966] p. 244).

<sup>6</sup>Not to accept this is to stand before the facts of the Church's history of authentic teaching in faith and morals absolutely helpless to explain them. Even a cursory reading in the history of the Church's moral teaching serves greatly to deepen one's understanding of what this guidance of the Holy Spirit means and does not and cannot mean. Informative in this respect are: Peter Browe, *Beiträge zur Sexualethik des Mittelalters* (Breslau, 1932), and *Zur Geschichte der Entmannung* (Breslau, 1936); John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge, 1957), and *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, 1965).

<sup>7</sup>Schüller, "Bemerkungen," p. 536.

this concrete case, he does not stand in opposition to genuine formal authority but to that material instance which normally embodies and pronounces the valid insights of such authority.

3) We are speaking of a specific instance of such conflict. It would be a sign of adolescent immaturity to allow such a limited and exceptional aspect of the question of authority to characterize our total attitude towards such authority. And a certain healthy scepticism towards our own insights, when they conflict with established authority, should not cripple our initiative; it should, however, keep us from mistaking our own fallible judgment for a newly found source of infallible light.

When we realize that the guidance of the Holy Spirit does not imply a theological "hot-line" which delivers correct answers to any and every pressing question; when we realize that the Holy Spirit guarantees the superior insight of the Church's authoritative teaching authority, in general and where the presumption is in its favor, not by a numinous inspiration but by providing the Church with individual human beings who possess the burning concern, the lack of prejudice, mental acumen, enthusiasm, and other qualities required to climb to this superior vantage point—then we realize that such guidance does not in every single instance eliminate those elements which can also hinder such a position being reached. We can then better understand the sources explaining some of the errors present in the history of the Church's authentic teaching.

Without any attempt at completeness, we might mention a few factors which can account, at least partially, for a concrete failure to arrive at an adequate insight in a given question.

One reason can be too great a distance from the fundamental given of the problem. Richard Egenter, speaking of phenomenological method, emphasizes a point which bears on this: "The phenomenological method can prevent one from 'philosophizing with too little reality,' which, in spite of a grasp of fundamental principles and admirable speculative achievement, remains ultimately impoverished."<sup>8</sup> Such a lack of contact with the archdata in the question of usury can to some extent explain the Church's continued failure to correctly esteem the economic realities of capital and interest and hence the moral implications of such a phenomenon. The importance of this consideration for the question of marriage morality cannot be stressed too much.

Another reason can be an attitude dominated by the thrust to fit all data

<sup>8</sup> Richard Egenter, "Dietrich von Hildebrands 'Christliche Ethik,'" *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 12 (1961) 148.

into an already established system. Dietrich von Hildebrand, who by no means underestimates the important role of systematic thinking, warns:

Another danger lurks in premature systematization: the tendency we have to be caught by the immanent logic of a system and to become more anxious to preserve the system than to do justice to the nature of being. The interpretation of a new datum is then determined more by the frames built up in the system than by the nature of the object. Even if a philosopher avoids the error of attempting to deduce this datum from general principles, he will nevertheless be blinded to the understanding of the nature of this new datum if he is more preoccupied by fitting it into a system than by the adequate study of the datum itself.<sup>9</sup>

Briefly, we could say that all the sources of blindness which can hinder human authority, in any of its forms, from seeing the truth (cultural blindness, social and political prejudice,<sup>10</sup> fear of undermining its own authority by a change of policy, to add only a few to the ones mentioned above) can also be the source of blindness for the authentic teaching authority of the Church. The guidance of the Holy Spirit excludes none of these as a source of possible blindness in a specific case. What such guidance does guarantee is that the instance of teaching authority in the Church is better protected from these sources of error than the individual left on his own and that in the majority of cases this instance of authority will in fact be in a position to see the reality as it is.<sup>11</sup>

Schüller sums this up when he says that the Church, qua teaching authority, as a general rule enjoys superior moral insight. Therefore it is the decision of the Church, in all probability, which will be correct, while it remains possible but improbable that the individual has found the truth.<sup>12</sup> From this he concludes that the onus of proof lies with him who opposes such authoritative teaching.

Our original question could then be specified a bit more: Does such a spontaneous judgment of the faithful have a legitimate role to play in bearing some of this onus of proof? In the following section we want to unfold the reasons why this question can be answered affirmatively.

#### CONNATURAL KNOWLEDGE

First of all, we should specify the subject of this spontaneous moral judgment: What is meant by "a considerable number of faithful Catholics"?

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Christian Ethics* (New York, 1953) p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. K. Rahner, *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* 2/1, 153 f.; also *Schriften* 5, 564.

<sup>11</sup> Schüller, "Bemerkungen," pp. 538 f.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 541.

This "considerable number" does not mean a majority; trying to express this in percentages is futile. It would seem justified to characterize this as a group large enough to make the impact of its opinion felt within the structure of the Church on its various levels.

By "faithful Catholics" we mean those who by the totality of their life in all its dimensions give evidence of a mature commitment to the central values of Christ's revelation. These are people for whom the law of Christ forms the center of their lives, those whose life testifies to God's presence in our world. They are the people who we have every reason to believe are in the life of Christ, His grace. (The more this group represents various cultures, sociopolitical strata, and age groups, "interested" as well as "disinterested" parties, the weightier it will be as a theological factor).

From the New Testament it is clear that there is an essential relationship between what a man freely decides and the knowledge he has, consequent upon this, of ultimate reality—the law of Christ. Scripture manifests the conviction that the spiritual man and the unspiritual man possess an essentially different capacity for grasping the things of God.<sup>13</sup> This can find expression in the more theological language of St. Paul: "An unspiritual person is one who does not accept anything of the Spirit of God: he sees it all as nonsense; it is beyond his understanding because it can only be understood by means of the Spirit. A spiritual man, on the other hand, is able to judge the value of everything" (1 Cor 2:14 f.). Or the same basic idea can be expressed more symbolically by John; "When he has brought out his flock, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice. They never follow a stranger but run away from him: they do not recognize the voice of strangers" (Jn 10:4 f.).

In the New Testament we find such an essential relationship between decision and knowledge that Paul can describe the purpose of his apostolate, on the one hand, in terms of knowledge (2 Cor 4:6), and on the other hand, in terms of faith (Rom 1:5). Commenting on Phil 1:9, Lohmeyer argues that knowledge here is identical with faith; it simply describes the same reality from the point of view of its cognitional implications.<sup>14</sup>

Schlier finds it significant that Paul's characterization of the pagan is primarily a description of his capacity to *know*.<sup>15</sup> Schlier also makes it clear

<sup>13</sup> Hans Lietzmann, *An die Korinther I/II* (Tübingen, 1949) p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ernst Lohmeyer, *Der Brief an die Philipper* (Göttingen, 1964) p. 31. Bultmann speaks frequently of this unity of faith and knowledge: *Theology of the New Testament* 1 (SCM cheap edition, 1965) 211–14, 318; 2 (same ed.) 74, 128.

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser* (Düsseldorf, 1957) p. 211. Cf. also Josef Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Regensburg, 1951) pp. 169 f.

that real knowledge—the ability to grasp ultimate reality, the reality of God, as it is—arises from decision: from faith and love. According to Schlier, this is an essential element of Paul's theology.<sup>16</sup> And knowledge as it is meant here signifies an immediate grasping of the thankful and contemplative heart, not a reflexive understanding in the form of a reasoned conclusion by way of cause-and-effect speculation. This latter, he says, is a derived and secondary form of the former.<sup>17</sup>

As is so often the case, these very formal statements of Scripture by no means solve such a specified, concrete question. This testimony of Scripture, however, does offer a positive basis for pursuing our investigation further. Now we have to ask if Catholic theological speculation offers us the instrumentality with which to underpin our thesis that the spontaneous judgment of a considerable segment of theologically unschooled faithful represents a valid theological datum; for it should be clear that where both parties of a conflict can be presumed to be "men of the Spirit," such scriptural statements can be used to defend both sides of the argument equally well.

If the only legitimate and highest form of human knowledge were abstract, conceptual knowledge, then there would be no reason to pursue this tack any further. Such, however, is not the case. Maritain says: "But we would have only a very incomplete picture of human knowledge if we did not take into account another type of knowledge, entirely different, which is not acquired through concepts and reasoning, but through *inclination*, as St. Thomas says, or through sympathy, congeniality or connaturality."<sup>18</sup> St. Thomas describes such knowledge in the following way:

Rectitudo autem iudicii potest contingere dupliciter: uno modo secundum perfectum usum rationis; alio modo propter connaturalitatem quamdam ad ea de quibus jam est iudicandum; sicut de eis quae castitatem pertinent, per rationis inquisitionem recte iudicat ille qui didicit scientiam moralem; sed per quamdam connaturalitatem ad ipsam, recte iudicat de eis ille qui habet virtutem castitatis.<sup>19</sup>

It is precisely a growing awareness of the fact and nature of such knowledge that prompts a number of theologians to see abstract and systematic knowledge as a secondary and derived form of human knowledge. Consequently, Maritain can speak of conceptually formulated knowledge as "a kind of after-knowledge."<sup>20</sup> August Brunner and Josef Pieper (the latter frequently referring to various texts of St. Thomas) emphasize that such reasoned knowledge should not be mistaken for the highest and purest form

<sup>16</sup> Schlier, *Epheser*, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Schlier, *Besinnung auf das Neue Testament* (Freiburg, 1964) p. 324.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York, 1952) p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Sum. theol.* 2-2, q. 45, a. 2.

of human knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Josef Fuchs distinguishes between a reflexive, conceptually formulated knowledge of moral realities (e.g. ethics or moral theology) and a richer primary knowledge which contains more than this reflexive formulation and is the very source of this secondary knowledge.<sup>22</sup> This conviction is most evident and functional in the numerous writings of Karl Rahner, where the distinction between the "preconceptually known" (what is *bewusst*) and the "conceptually known" (what is *gewusst*) appears as a key theological distinction.<sup>23</sup>

Fuchs also recognizes the legitimacy of an intuitive application of universal moral principles to the concrete situation:

*Applicatio legum universalium tamen non necessario fit modo explicito; nec requiritur cognitio abstracta et antecedens omnium principiorum. Immediata enim quadam intellectione (dicunt: "intuitu") perspicitur potest situatio sub aspectu morali, quae cognitio ergo minus est deductiva ex, quam potius fundata in suis rationibus perspectis.*<sup>24</sup>

Fuchs further remarks in this context that an explicit philosophical-theological reflection should act as an instance of control and confirmation of such preconceptual knowledge. This makes an important point. But this is no one-way street; both forms of knowledge (preconceptual and conceptual) must be ready to learn from one another. Neither has a right to act as the court of last appeal in all instances. In a case of conflict we simply cannot say a priori which source of data is right. Perhaps the supposedly genuine preconceptual knowledge is nothing more than a feeling and must be shown to be such by systematic reflection. Perhaps the system has to be overhauled in the light of new data, previously overlooked, and now presented through genuine preconceptual knowledge. The point of our present reflection (and it does not seem superfluous) is that the data offered us by genuine preconceptual knowledge deserves as serious consideration as the systematic reflection to which it might stand opposed. That its theological weight increases vastly when it also finds its expression in a consistent systematic theological articulation goes without saying.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *The Range of Reason*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> August Brunner, *Glaube und Erkenntnis* (Munich, 1951) pp. 48 f., 82-108; also his *Der Stufenbau der Welt* (Munich, 1950) pp. 120-28; Josef Pieper, *Glück und Kontemplation* (3rd ed.; Munich, 1962) pp. 71, 75 f.

<sup>22</sup> Josephus Fuchs, *Theologia moralis generalis* (Rome, 1965) p. 154.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, *Das Dynamische in der Kirche* (Freiburg, 1958) pp. 74-148; *Schriften* 5: "Dogmatische Erwägungen über das Wissen und Selbstbewußtsein Christi," pp. 222-48.

<sup>24</sup> Fuchs, *op. cit.*, p. 48. Cf. also Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Anyone familiar with the theological discussion of the last ten years within the Catholic Church on birth control will realize that this is precisely the situation today.



In a drastically brief form we want to attempt to describe in more detail the nature of this intuitive application of general moral principles to the concrete situation. This will be done by borrowing some ideas from an article by K. Rahner on the Ignatian Election.<sup>26</sup>

The person in the state of grace simply does not possess the same state of consciousness as the sinner or a person as yet in the immature state prior to the *optio initialis*. His very existence is now a realized and accepted loving relationship with God. However unconceptualized this might be, it constitutes the very heart of his consciousness. The form it takes in his consciousness will be more that of an experience of peace, hope, openness, etc., than that of ideas and concepts dealing with God, transcendence, decision, etc.

This arche-consciousness serves a function analogous to that of the first principles of logic and philosophy. It is similar to these in that it is the norm against which the particular is measured. It is different from these because it serves this function on a preconceptual but highly intellectual level of consciousness. The person confronted then with a concrete set of alternatives experiences the goodness or evil of an action as the preconceptual harmony or disharmony between what he is and is conscious of being (a freely accepted transcendence to the Infinite) and the concrete alternatives. The morally good, held in the light of the good he is and is conscious of being, harmonizes with this; it confirms, deepens, and corresponds to this fundamental peace, openness, tranquility. The morally evil alternative, held in this realized transcendence, clashes with and contradicts this fundamental peace and light.

To draw a weak parallel: this is analogous to the kind of knowledge one has that a certain movement of music "fits" a larger piece of music in tone, color, movement, etc. One knows, for example, with dead certainty that a hit by the Monkees does not "fit" anywhere in a Bach fugue—and this prior to any speculative reflection. The connatural knowledge we are speaking of is essentially different than this, of course; but such an example might be of some help in understanding its nature when contrasted with a reflexive speculation on the same matter.

Because of the preconceptual nature of such knowledge, we can be tempted to consider it as a mere feeling. Rahner remarks that such knowledge (a most intellectual, in fact sublimely spiritual, knowledge) can therefore be misread as a merely arbitrary opinion, as a "feeling" and "mood," as an unverifiable judgment of taste.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> K. Rahner, "Die Logik der existentiellen Erkenntnis bei Ignatius v. Loyola," in *Das Dynamische in der Kirche*, pp. 74-148. This attempted explanation is stimulated by Rahner's article and makes no claim to represent his thoughts on the present question.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

That such knowledge presents special problems in its verification; that it has its own sources of blindness; that a mere feeling can be mistakenly interpreted as such genuine, sublimely spiritual knowledge—all of this goes without saying. None of this, however, dare let us lose sight of the fact that such knowledge exists and has an importance which has too long been overlooked.<sup>28</sup>

Presuming that this line of thought is valid, it is possible to conceive of a situation where such connatural knowledge speaks with genuine authority even while seeming to stand in conflict with authoritative teaching. We have already said that to speak with authority means to speak from a vantage point of more valid insight into the question at hand. Granting the validity and nature of connatural knowledge as just explained, there are two possible sources of this superior insight. The one source is the arche-consciousness which serves as the measure of the specific alternatives. Seen from this point of view, the person in the state of grace has an essentially different and superior vantage point than the sinner. In the case where both parties of the conflict can be presumed to enjoy this superior arche-consciousness, the question then becomes: Does one of these hold a position from which the fulness of the concrete and specific reality in question can be better grasped? Are there real and tangible grounds for supposing that one of these parties stands at a disadvantage here, and hence can speculate on the matter but stands legitimately and understandably barred from essential dimensions of the concrete alternative itself? If this is so, and all other things being equal, then there is good reason to presume that the party enjoying this fuller insight into the concrete reality has the vantage point for richer insight, i.e., that his voice speaks authoritatively.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that this article handles only a small segment of the question of authority in the Church. It does not represent a position from which one can legitimately project a total theology of, or attitude towards, such authority. But the question it handles is not therefore insignificant. It cannot be, since it deals with a genuine source of truth. And as Christians, our goal must be to listen—obviously with an intensity proportionate to its importance—to every source of truth available, because this truth is ultimately none other than Christ Himself.

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<sup>28</sup> The author is presently preparing a dissertation in which these aspects of the question are handled at some length. The scope of this article makes it impossible to handle them here.