

## NOTES

### “HIERARCHIA VERITATUM”: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism (chap. 2, no. 11) includes the following passage:

In ecumenical dialogue, when Catholic theologians join with separated brethren in common study of the divine mysteries, they should, while standing fast by the teaching of the Church, pursue the work with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. *When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truths, since these vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.* Thus the way will be open whereby this kind of “fraternal emulation” will incite all to a deeper awareness and a clearer realization of the unfathomable riches of Christ.

#### HISTORY

The sentence on the hierarchy of truths does not come from the text proposed to the Council by the Secretariat for Christian Unity. The *Schema decreti de oecumenismo* of 1964 contains the whole paragraph 11, minus this sentence. This section had itself resulted from a rewriting of no. 10 of the schema of 1963, in which there was as yet no trace of a hierarchy of truths. The schema of 1964 was finalized by the Secretariat for Unity on March 21, 1964.

However, on November 25, 1963, during the debate on the first version of the Decree, Andrea Pangrazio, Archbishop of Gorizia-Gradisca in Italy, had asked that mention be made of the “hierarchical order of revealed truths.” The speech of the Archbishop is reproduced in part, with minor divergences, by Cardinal Lorenz Jaeger and by Fr. Bernard Leeming in their commentaries on the Decree. It appears in full in *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (ed. H. Küng *et al.*; New York, 1964) pp. 188–92. I quote Leeming's version:

A third remark: to arrive at a fair estimate of both the unity which now exists among Christians and the diversity which still remains, it seems very important to me to pay close attention to the *hierarchical order* of revealed truths which express the mystery of Christ and those elements which make up the Church.

Although all the truths revealed by divine faith are to be believed with the same divine faith, and all those elements which make up the Church must be kept with equal fidelity, not all of them are of equal importance.

Some truths are *on the level of our final goal*, such as the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption, God's love and mercy toward sinful humanity, eternal life in the perfect kingdom of God, and others.

Other truths are *on the level of means towards salvation*, such as that there are

seven sacraments, truths concerning the hierarchical structure of the Church, the apostolic succession, and others. These truths concern the means which are given by Christ to the Church for her pilgrim journey here on earth; when this journey comes to an end, so also do these means.

Now doctrinal differences among Christians have less to do with these primary truths on the level of our final goal, and deal mostly with truths on the level of means, which are certainly subordinate to those other primary truths.

But we can say that the unity of Christians consists in a common faith and belief in those truths which concern our final goal.

If we explicitly make these distinctions in conformity with the hierarchy of truths and elements, I think the existing unity among all Christians will be seen more clearly, and it will become evident that all Christians are already a family united in the primary truths of the Christian religion.<sup>1</sup>

After making this remarkable intervention, the Archbishop of Gorizia proposed no concrete amendment to the text. It may be for this reason that the second version of the schema, proposed to the conciliar fathers in 1964, which had considerably rewritten the text of our paragraph, still included no mention of a "hierarchical order" of revealed truths.

An amendment corresponding to Archbishop Pangrazio's address was handed in to the Secretariat for Unity only on October 7, 1964. This date is given by Cardinal Jeager (*op. cit.*, p. 116); it was the day after the vote on nos. 9-12 had given the following results: *Placet*: 2099; *Non placet*: 62. On the chapter as a whole, 564 voted *placet juxta modum*. The amendment in question was one of these; it was presented by one bishop only. This bishop, however, was not Archbishop Pangrazio but Cardinal Koenig, Archbishop of Vienna. The text of the amendment, as contained in *Modi a patribus conciliaribus propositi, Cap. II, 1964*, p. 12, where it is listed as Amendment 49, runs as follows:

Post "debent," addatur nova phrasis: "In comparandis doctrinis, meminerint existere ordinem seu 'hierarchiam' veritatum doctrinae catholicae, cum diversus sit earum nexus cum fundamento fidei christianae." Maximi momenti enim esse videtur pro dialogo oecumenico, ut tum veritates in quibus christiani conveniunt, tum illae in quibus differunt, potius ponderentur quam numerentur. Quamvis procul dubio omnes veritates revelatae eadem fide divina tenendae sint, momentum et 'pondus' earum differt pro nexu earum cum historia salutis et mysterio Christi.

As thus accepted by the Secretariat for Unity and presented to the Council, the amendment was slightly shorter than the text actually handed in by Cardinal Koenig. This contained two more lines designed to explain the idea further. To *fundamento* was added *et centro*; to

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Leeming, *The Vatican Council and Christian Unity* (New York, 1966) pp. 298-99.

*fidei christianae* was added *Jesu Christo, nempe Verbo pro salute nostra incarnato*. Then came a final explanation: *et aliae veritates ad ordinem finis, aliae ad ordinem mediorum salutis pertineant*. As presented to the Council, the amendment was approved on November 11, 1964.

#### PRECISIONS

The Secretariat for Unity was by no means the original author of the passage concerning *hierarchia veritatum*; and no discussion of this point took place at its many meetings. Since then, however, the Secretariat has attempted, on two occasions, to clarify the meaning of the text.

1) On April 16, 1970, the Secretariat promulgated the second part of its *Directorium*, under the general title *Ecumenism in Higher Education*. Chap. 2, no. 5 reads as follows:

#### Conditions of a Genuine Ecumenical Mind in Theology<sup>2</sup>

Ecumenical action "cannot but be fully and sincerely Catholic—faithful, that is, to the truth which we have received from the Apostles and Fathers, and in harmony with the faith which the Catholic Church has always confessed." But we should always preserve the sense of an order based on degree, or of an "hierarchy" in the truths of Catholic doctrine which, although they all demand a due assent of faith, do not all occupy the same principal or central place in the mystery revealed in Jesus Christ, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith.

Students should learn to distinguish between revealed truths, which all require the same assent of faith, and theological doctrines. Hence they should be taught to distinguish between "the deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine," and the way they are enunciated, between the truth to be enunciated and the various ways of perceiving and more clearly illustrating it, between apostolic tradition and merely ecclesiastical traditions. Already from the time of their philosophical training students should be put in a frame of mind to recognize that different ways of stating things in theology too are legitimate and reasonable, because of the diversity of methods or ways by which theologians understand and express divine revelation. Thus it is that these various theological formulae are often complementary rather than conflicting.

2) Again, the *Reflections and Suggestions concerning Ecumenical Dialogue* issued by the Secretariat on September 18, 1970, contain the following passage:

One will remember "that there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of the truths of Catholic doctrine based on their different relation to the foundation of the Christian faith." All does not present itself at the same level in the life of the Church

<sup>2</sup> I quote from a mimeographed English text distributed by the Secretariat for Christian Unity.

as well as in her teaching; indeed, all the revealed truths demand the same adhesion of faith; yet, according to their more or less close nearness to the foundation of the revealed mystery, they are in a diverse situation in relation to one another, and they entertain different relationships among themselves. For instance, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which must not be isolated from what the Council of Ephesus states about Mary, Mother of God, presupposes—in order to be grasped adequately, in an authentic life of faith—the dogma of grace, to which it is linked and which is necessarily grounded in the redeeming incarnation of the Word.<sup>3</sup>

These clarifications call for some theological remarks. The text of the Decree had remained unexplained. In the light of the address pronounced before the Council by the Archbishop of Gorizia, and in the light of the full text of Cardinal Koenig's amendment, the intended sense of the text would be that the truths of Catholic doctrine fall into two great categories: some pertain to our final end ("such as the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption, God's love and mercy toward sinful humanity, eternal life in the perfect kingdom of God . . ."); others pertain to the means of salvation (sacraments, the hierarchical structure of the Church, apostolic succession . . .). The former will last in heaven; the latter will disappear with the present world. The Archbishop then suggested that divergences among Christians relate to the latter rather than to the former.

The first clarification proposed by the Secretariat paraphrases the text of the Decree on Ecumenism in such a way that the "foundation of the Christian faith" is identified, in keeping with Cardinal Koenig's proposed text, with "the mystery revealed in Jesus Christ"; the relationship of a truth to the foundation of the Christian faith is equated with its "place" in this mystery: not all truths of Catholic doctrine are in the "same principal or central" place. The rest of Section 5 of *Directorium II* implies that there is also a "hierarchy" between "revealed truths" and "theological doctrines," between the deposit of faith and the way it is enunciated, between the truth to be enunciated and its reception and illustration, between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical traditions. Thus the "hierarchy" within revealed truths is only one among several hierarchies in the sum total of Catholic doctrine. I take it as being implied in the list contained in no. 5 that the "hierarchy" of revealed truths is not identical with the distinction, made by Pope John in his opening address at the first session of the Council, between the deposit of faith and its formulation. This point, which is itself made in no. 6 of the Decree on

<sup>3</sup> *Reflections and Suggestions IV*, 4, a. I quote from the French text, which in this case is the official text of publication (*Documentation catholique*, Oct. 4, 1970, no. 1571, p. 879).

Ecumenism, is different from the purpose of no. 11. No. 6 refers to a distinction, in each "article of faith," between the object of faith and its expression; no. 11 to the relative importance of the articles of faith compared with one another. Likewise, no. 5 of the *Directorium* distinguishes between a sort of degradation from the object of faith down to its expression down to its reception, and the degree of nearness of the articles of faith to the central place in the revealed mystery.

The explanation provided in *Reflections and Suggestions* is remarkable chiefly for two points.

First, the hierarchy of revealed truths refers not only to the Church's teaching but also to her life. That is, it is not only in the teaching that the revealed truths are not "on the same level," but also in the life of the Church. It is not said whether the "hierarchy" of truths in the Church's teaching corresponds exactly to that which may obtain in her life. But one can entertain the idea that there may be two "hierarchies" of revealed truths in the Church: the one in her teaching, the other in her life. For example, if all the articles of the Creed of Nicaea occupy a prominent place in the Church's teaching, they do not necessarily hold a corresponding place in her life. To give an obvious example, the descent into inferno, which is mentioned in good place in the Creed, is practically ignored in life. Reversely, the Mariological doctrines, which are not included in the Creed, have at times held a prominent place in the Church's life.

Second, an example is provided: the Immaculate Conception. This must be seen in conjunction with the doctrine of the Council of Ephesus on *theotokos* (that is, in relation to Christology), and also with the doctrine of grace (that is, again, in relation to soteriology). An important point is also suggested here: this is not a matter for purely intellectual speculation, but it must be enshrined in an authentic life of faith. In other words, the life of faith pre-eminently guides the faithful in their assessment of the "hierarchy" of revealed truths. The meaning of the example is clearly that Christology and soteriology, the dogma of Ephesus and the doctrine of grace and salvation, are more central to the revealed mystery than their application to Mary in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

#### THE MALTA REPORT

In its no. 6, the *Malta Report* proposes specifically as matter for dialogue the following possible convergences of lines of thought:

... between the Anglican distinction of fundamentals from nonfundamentals and the distinction implied by the Vatican Council's references to a "hierarchy of truths," to the difference between "revealed truths" and "the manner in which they are formulated" (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 62), and to diversities in theological

tradition being often “complementary rather than conflicting” (*De oecumenismo*, no. 17).

The last two references (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 62, and *De oecumenismo*, no. 17) are not especially creative, as they are simply borrowed from notes 24 and 25, which illustrate the passage we have quoted from *Directorium oecumenicum* II, 2, no. 5.

The reference to the Anglican distinction of fundamentals from non-fundamentals is not self-explanatory. It is proposed as a possible point of comparison which deserves investigation. Such a study has not yet been initiated by the official dialogues between the two churches.

#### SOME COMMENTATORS ON THE DECREE

1) Cardinal Jaeger calls the mention of “hierarchy” of truths “particularly important.”<sup>4</sup> Yet he does not explain it in the context of Catholic doctrine. Instead, he refers to the views of the Lutheran Reformers on “the highest articles of God’s majesty,” that is, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. He adds: “No one will dispute that these doctrines actually rank highest among all the truths of revelation.”<sup>5</sup> He then remarks that present-day Lutherans are not all in agreement with Luther on the value of the ancient Creeds. He ends his commentary on no. 11 with a reference to no. 20 of the Decree, where differences between Catholics and Protestants in matters of Christology and soteriology are considered proper subjects for ecumenical dialogue.

2) Bernard Leeming’s short commentary on the point follows a different line. For him, the text suggests mainly that the ecumenical dialogue should pay much more attention to the end, on which there is already unity, and which evokes a “dynamism which can lead Christ’s Church ‘along paths which none of us can foresee or predict, to the fulness of unity which Christ wills,’”<sup>6</sup> than to the means, on which Christians are divided. In other words, the immediate meaning of the hierarchy of truths in *De oecumenismo*, no. 11, would be that which Archbishop Pangrazio had explained in his conciliar intervention.

3) Canon Gustave Thils (like Cardinal Jaeger, a member of the Secretariat for Unity while the Decree was being written) provides a more elaborate commentary. He begins by affirming: “The mention of the ‘hierarchy’ of values at the heart of the Christian mystery is very significant and of capital importance.”<sup>7</sup> The principle is then paraphrased in this

<sup>4</sup> Lorenz Jaeger, *A Stand on Ecumenism: The Council’s Decree* (London, 1965) p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> Leeming, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>7</sup> Gustave Thils, *Le décret sur l’oecuménisme du deuxième Concile du Vatican* (Paris, 1966) p. 124.

way: "The ecumenical dialogue must take account of the organic molding of the truths which it brings out on the table, and must not present these on the same level, as though each of them were connected equally with divine revelation. In the sum total of Christian thought, one should distinguish what, after critical examination, is a truth of faith, what is theological truth, theological hypothesis, or the speculation of religious philosophy. . . ." <sup>8</sup> In other words, Thils understands the hierarchy of truths (which, significantly, he identifies with a hierarchy of values) to refer to the necessary differentiation between the Christian faith as such, as the response to the revelation of God in Christ, and the aura of theological or philosophical speculation which surrounds the faith as the believer passes from a simple acceptance to a systematic intellectual elaboration of faith. The point of the "hierarchy" would be mainly to draw the line between the faith and the schools of theology. This, evidently, would be the exact opposite of what I have found to be implied in the clarifications proposed by the Secretariat for Unity itself.

Canon Thils continues with the remark that the Decree is primarily concerned with the criterion of the hierarchy of truths. This criterion is *the* foundation of the Christian faith. "There are truths that concern the very foundation of the Christian mystery, such as the Spirit, the gifts of grace, the Eucharist. Others are not tied so deeply and so closely with the Christian mystery." <sup>9</sup> Of these, however, Thils provides no example. He then raises the question of a hierarchy within the dogmas of faith: "A dogmatic definition does not bear necessarily on a doctrine that is central to the Christian mystery." <sup>10</sup> On the contrary, central doctrines are so evident that they normally do not need a definition to be known and accepted. He concludes: "However this may be, those who take part in the ecumenical dialogue will have to be very eager to respect the hierarchy of value within the doctrines and even the dogmas, according to their link with the Christian mystery, the unfathomable riches of Christ." There follows a quotation from Oscar Cullmann, who calls this passage of the Decree "the most revolutionary, not only of the schema *De oecumenismo*, but also of all the schemas of the present Council." <sup>11</sup>

If I understand Thils correctly, the primary hierarchy is that which obtains between the faith itself and the theologies. The hierarchy within defined dogma is patterned on this, as some dogmas belong to the level of theological certainty rather than to that of faith. I wish that some examples had been given. I may suggest, however, that the dogma of transubstantiation (Fourth Lateran Council, Council of Trent) could be placed in this category. The theology of a certain school could, at a given period of the Church's life, seem so important to the defense of the orthodox faith that

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

it could be defined, not indeed as pertaining to the heart of the Christian mystery, but as being, within the categories of that school, a true expression of some aspect of the mystery.

4) In the *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* published by Herder and Herder, the commentator on *De oecumenismo* is Professor Johannes Feiner, of Switzerland, a consultant to the Secretariat for Christian Unity. The main point in his remarks on no. 11 is that the place of a doctrine in the hierarchy of truths does not derive from its "formal" element: this resides in its being taught by the Church. The place of a doctrine derives from "the significance of its content."<sup>12</sup> The criterion by which to evaluate the contents of the Christian doctrines is this "closeness to the mystery of Christ, which of course includes the mystery of the Trinity." Speaking more concretely, Feiner writes: "The statements of faith, which are direct utterances upon the foundation (or one could use a simpler metaphor and speak of the "centre") of the Christian faith, always possess the first rank in the hierarchy of truths." In other words, the nearness in question does not belong to the ontological order. Who knows, for instance, which is closer to the foundation: creation or the Incarnation? It belongs rather to the expressive or noetic order: Which Christian truths best express the heart of the gospel and lead the faithful more directly to God? If Catholics always kept the central element of the faith at the centre of their own life, Feiner thinks that their entire life-style would change.

Finally, Feiner asks a momentous question: "The question must also be posed whether divergencies in the interpretation of basic Christian truths are genuinely such as to divide the Church, and are not for the most part merely differences in theology."<sup>13</sup> No answer is given to this. Yet the style suggests that Feiner would answer in the affirmative: apparent differences on the interpretation of basic truths may be differences in theology rather than in faith. In this case, one should logically conclude (though the author does not advance that far) that some of the basic doctrines, as formulated by the Church, express a theology rather than the faith.

#### BRIEF LOOK AT THE PAST

I have tried to discover if the present question of the "hierarchy" of doctrines has been raised before in Catholic theology. The following remarks are far from exhaustive.

Theologians of the fourteenth century investigated a connected problem when they enumerated the different kinds of heresies. Thus, William

<sup>12</sup> *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1968) Note II, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

of Ockham (1300–1359), in his *Dialogus adversus haereticos*, mentions the opinion of an anonymous author:

The only truths that are to be considered Catholic and necessary to salvation are explicitly or implicitly stated in the canon of the Bible. . . . All other truths, which neither are inserted in the Bible nor can formally and necessarily be inferred from its contents, are not to be held as Catholic, even if they are stated in the writings of the Fathers or the definitions of the supreme pontiffs, and even if they are believed by all the faithful. To assent to them firmly through faith, or for their sake to bind the human reason or intellect, is not necessary to salvation.<sup>14</sup>

Here we have a clear criterion for a hierarchy of doctrines: their necessity or nonnecessity for salvation; in the quotation, this corresponds to another criterion: their explicit or implicit insertion in the Bible.

Thus, one can look for a formal or for a material principle regulating the hierarchy of truths. In the current instance, the presence of a truth in the Bible would be the material principle, its necessity for salvation the formal principle. Now in the controversies of the sixteenth century, the first Reformers, along with Luther, opted for a formal principle of Christian truths, viz., that which expresses justification by grace through faith, although this was tied to the material principle of *scriptura sola*. Yet Luther's remarkable freedom with and from some books of the New Testament shows that the focus of his concern lay with the formal principle of Christian truth. On the other hand, the Catholic controversialists took their stand, more often than not, on a material principle of Christian truth, viz., that which has been universally taught by the Church and its magisterium. Much of the misunderstanding which arose in the crisis of the sixteenth century hinged on this basic divergence of interest: Should we look for a formal or for a material criterion of the hierarchy of Christian truths?

In the second half of the sixteenth century, Melchior Cano's *De locis theologicis* (composed around 1546, published in 1564) firmly entrenched the material principle in the Catholic mind as that which is normative to discern the value of a doctrine. It is by seeking for its source and asking the question "Who teaches this?" that Cano assigns each teaching or theory its place in the range of Christian doctrines, and its degree of certainty. The question, however, as raised by Cano does not concern a hierarchy within the doctrines to be believed, but rather a hierarchy within the teachings of the Church and the theologians, some of which are to be believed with divine faith, others to be accepted as theologically certain though not as part of the revelation, others as probable though not certain, etc.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in my *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York, 1959) p. 31.

At the same period, the Catechism of the Council of Trent (published by Pius V in 1566) based its own plan on the assumption that there is indeed a hierarchy within the doctrines that are received in the Christian faith: the primary doctrines deal with the unity and trinity of the divine Persons and their acts, and are contained in the Apostles' Creed. This passage deserves to be quoted:

Cum multa in Christiana religione fidelibus proponantur, quorum singulatim vel universe certam et firmam fidem habere oportet, tum vero illud primo ac necessario omnibus credendum est, quod veluti veritatis fundamentum ac summam de divinae essentiae unitate et trium personarum distinctione, earumque actionibus, quae praecipua quadam ratione illis attribuantur, Deus ipse nos docuit, hujus mysterii doctrinam breviter in Symbolo Apostolorum comprehensam esse, parochus docebit.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, the first part of the Catechism explains the Symbol; the second part, the "discipline of the sacraments, which is, by God's ordinance, necessary and, by its usefulness, very fruitful"; the third part, the Decalogue; the fourth part, the Lord's Prayer. Here the notion of hierarchy, though not so called, is applied to the very object of the Christian faith. This is still done on a material principle; yet the material principle (the locus of teaching, in the Apostles' Creed, in the sacramental discipline, in the Decalogue, in the Lord's Prayer) corresponds to an underlying formal principle: what has the nature of an end is in the Creed, what has the nature of a means to the end is found elsewhere.

In the early seventeenth century, Cardinal Jacques Davy du Perron (1556-1618) touches on the question of a hierarchy of doctrine in his *Réfutation de l'écrit de maître Daniel Tilenus contre un discours touchant les traditions apostoliques* (1601). Du Perron contends that the chief institutions of Christianity and those "which pertain to the essence of salvation" can be shown by Scripture; the others, which are less important, like "those which belong to the external cult and ceremonies," are shown by the practice of the Church. Among those that are of the essence of salvation and necessary to it, however, we should distinguish between points that are absolutely necessary ("which are few, and all contained in the Symbols of the Church") and those that are conditionally necessary.<sup>16</sup> The former are necessary at all times and places; the latter become necessary only after they have been taught by the Church and known by the faithful. Here the material principle of the presence of a doctrine in the Creeds is identified with the formal principle of its absolute necessity to salvation, though all that is necessary, whether absolutely or

<sup>15</sup> *Catechismus Romanus*, Pars 1, cap. 1, no. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. my *La tradition au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France et en Angleterre* (Paris, 1969) pp. 37-39.

conditionally, is also demonstrable from Scripture.

Later in the same century, Christopher Davenport (1598–1680) proposed a distinction, in matters of faith, between *fundamenta* (explicitly contained in Scripture or in the apostolic traditions) and *fundamentalia* (deduced from the *fundamenta* with certainty).<sup>17</sup> Again, the criterion for a differentiation within the doctrines of faith is material rather than formal.

#### PERSPECTIVES

This short historical survey is extremely relevant for our discussion. For the few Catholics who have looked into the possibility of a hierarchy within the doctrines of faith have done it chiefly from the standpoint of the locus or source of the doctrine in question, that is, in the light of a material principle. Those who introduce also a formal principle (end-means, or necessity-nonnecessity for salvation) closely connect it with a material principle (the Creed or Scripture). Yet the Decree on Ecumenism radically breaks with precedent by proposing a formal principle without a correlative material principle: the nearness of a doctrine to the heart of the Christian mystery.

Here several lines may be open. The distinction between doctrines relating to the end and doctrines relating to the means may be very fruitful, especially if we can place the sacramental, ecclesiological, and Mariological doctrines among those relating to the means. (I think, however, that ecclesiological doctrines belong also, in part, to the end; and by considering Mary “in the mystery of Christ and of the Church,” the last chapter of the *De ecclesia* would seem to place Mariology also, partly, among the doctrines relating to the end.)

One can also pursue the line of thought suggested in *Reflections and Suggestions*: all doctrines are not at the same level in the *life* of the Church. An investigation of what doctrines are operative in the life of the faithful would throw light on an actual hierarchy of doctrines, which may happen to differ from a theoretical and theological hierarchy. One cannot anticipate the conclusions to be drawn from this as to the normative character of some doctrines, since this would depend on what in fact has been uncovered by research in this field.

One can also reflect on one of Canon Thils’s remarks: the Christian

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.—After writing this essay, two titles have come to my notice: Ulrich Valeske, *Hierarchia veritatum: Theologiegeschichtliche Hintergründe und mögliche Konsequenzen eines Hinweises im Oekumenismusdekret des II Vatikanischen Konzils zum zwischenkirchlichen Gespräch* (Munich, 1968); H. Mühlen, “Die Bedeutung der Differenz zwischen Zentraldogmen und Randdogmen für den ökumenischen Dialog: Zur Lehre des II Vatikanischen Konzils von der Hierarchia veritatum,” in Leuba-Stirnemann, ed., *Freiheit in der Begegnung*, pp. 191–230. I have not seen these publications.

mystery is, in the context of the Christian faith, so self-evident that it does not need to be defined. Can we conclude from this that a definition of faith concerns an element that is peripheral rather than central? This cannot, of course, be affirmed without a special investigation of each case. However, it tends to understress the normative aspect of a definition, whether by a council or by a pope: the definition does not, by itself, place a doctrine at the center of Christian truth. A doctrine thus defined may remain peripheral and its importance secondary.

One might investigate the analogy that may exist between the "hierarchy" of revealed truth and the distinction, made famous by Pope John, between the deposit of faith and its formulation. Thus one can wonder if some doctrines as taught in the Church or as asserted by the magisterium (e.g., the recently defined Mariological doctrines or papal infallibility) do not belong to the formulation rather than to the deposit of the faith. That is, the purpose or essence of such a doctrine would lie not in itself but in its contribution to the defense, illustration, or enhancement of a truth which is central to the Christian mystery. Were this so (I say this hypothetically), the denial of such a doctrine would not necessarily amount to a rejection of the center of the Christian mystery, but could be no more than a rejection of the adequacy, value, or usefulness of this particular defense, illustration, or enhancement of the mystery.

The question of *hierarchy veritatum* deserves further and deeper study on our part. In keeping with the suggestion of the *Malta Report*, it should be studied in connection with analogous conceptions in Anglican and perhaps in Protestant thought. I am sure that further investigation would open up other perspectives than those I have briefly mentioned. This paper attempts to be no more than an introduction to the problem.

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