

THE AUTHORITY OF DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT

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II

THE first part of this article, in the October BLACKFRIARS, was designed to show that, in the Catholic view, Scripture is constitutive of the content of revelation; it embodies the Word of God in inspired writing, while Tradition is regulative of that content; for it interprets the sense of Scripture, and defines that sense by Apostolic authority to be what God's word to men is and means. This authority, which is exercised both in the Church's ordinary and in its supreme magisterium, is not the sole regulative element in Tradition, though it is the finally decisive one. The true direction of the developing mind of the Church is continuously maintained, though in a relative and less final sense, by a twofold operation, the *lex orandi* and the work of the *schola theologorum*. The former (through liturgy and devotion) draws out the implications of dogma in terms of living, and thus clarifies to the worshipper the full meaning and inter-connection of the truths of Faith. The latter, by the science of theology, brings rational analysis to the elucidation of revealed truth, making use of the researches of various branches of scholarship; philosophical, exegetical, historical and scientific. The function of sound learning therefore is to provide the checks by which human reason, under the guidance of Tradition, assesses new developments in the light of their coherence with the constant teaching of the Church and their consonance with the biblical data, in which the substance of the *depositum fidei* is embodied.

Thus by a twofold process, preparatory to the final formulation of dogma, truth emerges and error is eliminated. During the process, the authority of the episcopate safeguards this development, and, at the end of it, sets the seal of truth by its united teaching (ordinary magisterium) upon new insights into the deposit of faith, thus made explicit under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, in the mind of the Church. But the ultimate and decisive determinant of what is contained in revelation is the verdict of the Apostolic See of Rome, in the exercise of its supreme teaching magisterium. This is expressed either by tacit acceptance of the

decrees of Councils, as has happened at times in the past, or more commonly by explicit confirmation of such decrees, or by the independent promulgation of an authoritative definition. In all these the Holy See acts in its own right, and the finality of the Church's consent is entirely dependent on this act, though, especially in the case of definition apart from a Council, the virtual consent of the ordinary magisterium may well have preceded it.¹ Today the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, though they differ about this ultimate determinant of doctrinal definition, are, apart from it, in fundamental agreement upon the nature and function of Tradition in the life of the Church. The declaration of the Orthodox delegates to the World Council of the Churches contains these words:

The Holy Spirit abides and witnesses through the totality of the Church's life and experience. The Bible is given to us within the context of Apostolic Tradition in which in turn we possess the authentic interpretation and explication of the Word of God. Loyalty to Apostolic Tradition safeguards the reality and continuity of church unity.

It is through the Apostolic ministry that the mystery of Pentecost is perpetuated in the Church. The Episcopal Succession from the Apostles constitutes an historical reality in the life and structure of the Church and one of her presuppositions of unity through the ages. The unity of the Church is preserved through the unity of the Episcopate. The Church is one Body whose historical continuity and unity is also safeguarded by the common faith arising spontaneously out of the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Church.²

Before the Great Schism doctrinal development arose from within the single corporate organism. Authority, in the proclamation of the Faith and in defining it, resided in the teaching hierarchy, whose decisions were drawn up and promulgated in Councils. Councils received ecumenical status by the subsequent

¹ This is the meaning of the famous *ex sese* clause in the Vatican Decree: *ideoque ejusmodi Romani Pontificis definitiones ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae irreformabiles esse*. Denzinger—Bannwart 1839; Freiburg 1932.

² Evanston Report. S.C.M. Press 1954, pages 93–94.

acceptance of the universal episcopate in communion with the Apostolic see of Rome.³ Their formulations, thus accepted, safeguarded the truths believed and taught by the whole Mystical Body from the beginning by expressing them more fully; and they were held to be infallible. In this way true developments were distinguished from false and incorporated in the historic tradition of Christendom. By the middle of the ninth century the schism, which had been long maturing, came at last to a head. Its causes were deep lying and complex, and the divisions created by it hardened only slowly, and were long in being recognized as permanent. When at last the separation had come to be seen as such, the traditional conception of the Church as an organic whole was in no way changed on either side of the division. Still less did the existence of schism lend countenance to a belief that the Church, so conceived, could be divided into two or more parts, each part having an equal claim to recognition as a component of the Mystical Body.

Both East and West, since then, have continued to regard each other as potential parts of the Church, possessing real apostolically descended hierarchies, witnessing to the Faith of Christendom, though cut off from visible unity and in consequence from the ultimate safeguard of the authentic Tradition. Since its breach with the West the Eastern Orthodox Church has become static in its appeal to the past, and doctrinal development within it is virtually at a standstill.⁴ Yet in regard to unity and Tradition its theological position is almost entirely in line with Catholicism. The novelty of belief in a divisible Church was a product of the

3 The learned and impartial historian Duchesne sums up the position in Christendom of the Church and See of Rome in the time before Constantine as follows:

"Thus all the Churches throughout the known world, from Arabia, Osrhoene, and Cappadocia to the extreme west, felt the incessant influence of Rome in every respect, whether as to faith, discipline, administration, ritual or works of charity. She was as St Irenaeus says, "known everywhere and respected everywhere, and her guidance was universally accepted". No competitor, no rival stands up against her; no one conceives the idea of being her equal. Later on there will be patriarchs and other local primates, whose first beginnings can be but vaguely perceived during the course of the third century. Above these rising organizations, and above the whole body of isolated Churches, the Church of Rome rises in supreme majesty, the Church of Rome represented by the long series of her bishops, which ascends to the two chiefs of the Apostolic College; she knows herself to be, and is considered by all, the centre and the organ of unity."

4 In spite of their boast of unchanging antiquity their theology, rites and Canon Law represent, not the first ages but a comparatively advanced development, that of the Byzantine period. And they stay there satisfying neither the need of continuous development that is the mark of a living Church, nor the rival ideal of unchanged primitive observance. *The Orthodox Eastern Church* by Adrian Fortescue, London 1911, page 394.

multiple schisms of the Reformation; with it came new developments in doctrine, no longer arising from the ancient and historic Tradition of Christendom, but from the varied and sometimes contradictory insights of the Reformers. Divisibility or unicity therefore is the fundamental question at issue in a disunited Christianity, and is the real crux of the ecumenical dialogue.

We have now to consider the working out of doctrinal development in those Christian allegiances which hold that the Church, Christ's Mystical Body, though united by a common sharing of the inner life of grace, and possessing a ministry and dominical ordinances which are in accord with Christ's will, is nevertheless externally divided and broken up by schisms within the body. The Church of England, owing to its historical situation and peculiar attributes, is a microcosm of ecumenical differences. It contains within its boundaries types of belief which put it in sympathy with every element, both Catholic and Protestant, in divided Christendom. At the same time its doctrine concerning the nature and constitution of the Church, though markedly Catholic and sacramental in type, of necessity stands for the Protestant concept of divisibility of external structure. For this reason, in examining the criteria by which the truth or falsity of developments in doctrine are judged in Christian bodies springing from the Reformation, we shall confine our attention to what is held by theologians of various schools within the Church of England.

Fifty years ago a learned Anglican divine Dr Charles Bigg, Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford University, wrote to *The Times* as follows:

'Every abuse of the medieval and even of the later Roman Church—Papal infallibility, the Immaculate Conception, transubstantiation, not to speak of a host of others—can be not unreasonably defended from the usage of the sixth, fifth, fourth and even the third century. This may seem a strange assertion, but in spite of the great authority of Jewel, it can be maintained, Church history is a stream of development, and it is not possible to draw a line across it at any point and say what comes before that line is sound, and what comes after it is corrupt.'⁵

The context of this letter was the Ritual controversy of the early twentieth century, and the moral was drawn that the appeal to

⁵ *The Times*, March 2, 1905.

the tradition of the first six centuries of Christian antiquity is wholly inadmissible by Anglican Evangelicals, who must remain true to their faith in the absolute supremacy of Scripture. In the fifty years that have elapsed since Dr Bigg's letter was written there has been an increased and generous recognition, from this quarter, of the value of tradition for the elucidation of the meaning of the gospel. In the Report of the Evangelical group presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury, tradition is described as, in its full sense:

'The Church's collective understanding of the Gospel. It is, therefore, not to be confined to the tradition of any one age or any one area of the Church. The Holy Spirit did not cease to operate in the Church after Nicaea, or after Chalcedon, or after 1054, or after the sixteenth century. Nor did He absent himself from the East or from the West, from the Lutheran, the Calvinist, or the Anglican parts of the Church. Tradition includes, therefore, the tradition of the Churches of the Reformation; and their contributions, as well as those of the early and medieval periods and of the post-Reformation era, must be given the full weight which is their due.'⁶

It is clear that in the conception of the Church here presupposed, tradition can have no finally decisive function in distinguishing true from false doctrinal developments, though it may perhaps be a useful guide to reason and sound learning in attempting to make this discrimination. For those who hold the view of tradition set out above in the Evangelical Report, Scripture is indeed the sole source of divine truth, but the interpretation of that truth is limited to human reasoning power, without further means of discrimination between true or false, and in consequence to what Dr Salmon calls 'that homely kind of certainty which suffices to govern our practical decisions in all the most important affairs of life and which logicians will only class as high probability'.⁷

This position, which represents one stream of opinion, within the Church of England, concerning the sufficiency of Scripture can find considerable support in the xxxix Articles where, in the article 'of the Authority of General Councils', Holy Scripture is set down as the final criterion by which the authority of such

⁶ *The Fullness of Christ—The Church's Growth into Catholicity*. London 1950, page 63.

⁷ *The Infallibility of the Church* by George Salmon, D.D. Abridged Edition, London 1952, page 30.

Councils in things concerning salvation is to be judged. Parallel with this stream of opinion however there has been another, which, while subscribing to the tenet of the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation, lays emphasis, not without support also from the Articles,⁸ upon the decisive authority of the Church in controversies of Faith. This was the position of a long line of Anglican divines during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it became the foundation upon which the Tractarians built their revival. The classical exposition of this line of thought is Newman's *Prophetical Office of the Church*. He sets in the Advertisement to this work the noble profession of Archbishop Bramhall as representative of the standard divines of the Caroline period, and as the text of his own exposition of their principles:

'And if I should mistake the right Catholic Church out of human frailty or ignorance . . . I do implicitly and in the preparation of my mind submit myself to the true Catholic Church, the Spouse of Christ, the Mother of the Saints, the Pillar of Truth. And seeing my adherence is firmer to the Infallible Rule of Faith, that is the Holy Scriptures interpreted by the Catholic Church, than to mine own private judgment or opinion, although I should unwittingly fall into an error, yet this cordial submission is an implicit retraction thereof, and I am confident will be so accepted by the Father of Mercies, both from me and all others who seriously and sincerely do seek after peace and truth.'⁹

Newman himself in the eighth Lecture of the *Prophetical Office* explicitly rejects the possibility that Salmon's homely kind of certainty, which suffices to govern our practical decisions in all the most important affairs of life, can be sufficient for determining from the Scriptures whether the Church's doctrine is Apostolic, or how far Apostolic. For this, he maintains, recourse must be had to the appeal to antiquity. Ideally, Newman held, and to some extent in fact, the Church is infallible: but he held it, as it were, hypothetically.

'Not only is the Church Catholic bound to teach the Truth, but she is ever divinely guided to teach it; her discernment of it is secured by a heavenly as well as by a human rule. She is indefectible in it, and therefore not only has authority to en-

⁸ Article xx.

⁹ *The Via Media* by J. H. Newman, Volume I. London 1891, page xii.

force, but is of authority in declaring it. . . . The Church not only transmits the faith by human means, but has a supernatural gift for that purpose; that doctrine, which is true, considered as an historical fact, is true also because she teaches it.¹⁰

He goes on to maintain that the gift of infallibility, supposing that were ever included as an original endowment of the Church, is proportioned to the perfection of its unity, and since the Church is not now one, it is not infallible; the full prophetic idea is not now fulfilled; and with the idea also is lost the full endowment, and the attribute of infallibility in particular, supposing that were ever included in it.¹¹

Newman then points out that soundness of doctrine is one of the privileges infringed by broken unity, and this is plain from the simple fact that the separated branches of the Church do disagree with each other in the details of faith; discordance in teaching, which once was not, among witnesses of the truth, being the visible proof of that truth being impaired, as well as the breach of the condition guaranteeing it. From this he deduces that the Ancient Church, until it broke up into portions, must be the Anglican model in all matters of doctrine. Hence the appeal to ecclesiastical antiquity. Newman appears not to have adverted to the difficulty caused by the inability of a long list of Anglican divines, whose names he gives, to assign any definite period to which the name of Antiquity can be given; he says that the period of purity cannot be fixed much earlier than the Council of Sardica in 347, nor so late as the seventh General Council in 789. He calls this an immaterial disagreement, remarking that the principle is clear, though the fact is obscure. In later life, as a Catholic, in editing the Lectures for publication he included in footnotes a number of corrective comments on the text. On this point he remarks; how can it be immaterial when the faith of Christendom, of each one of us, is determined by the limit given to 'Antiquity'?¹² Nor did Newman, at the time of writing the Lectures, seem to be aware of a still greater flaw in this theory of an appeal to antiquity, namely that it made the Catholic Church not a visible organism, as antiquity had always held it to be, but an abstraction, and an abstraction which was incapable of giving an answer to a doc-

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, page 190.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, page 201.

¹² *op. cit.*, page 207.

trinal question of capital importance: what is the nature and constitution of the Church by which God's revelation is mediated to men? The first disturbing shock that Newman received was the realization that the appeal to antiquity could give no answer, especially in the Donatist controversy, to the question of schism, apart from the traditional belief that the Church could not be divided, and that the true Church is necessarily that in communion with the See of Rome. It was this that first set him thinking out the implications of doctrinal development, which brought him in the end to the Catholic Church.

There can be no doubt, I think, that research into Christian origins, and modern critical New Testament studies, has led Anglo-Catholic scholars, in attempting to work out a reasoned basis of authority for their beliefs, to move either in a more papalist direction, or away from the Tractarian appeal to antiquity and an infallible Church, to a theory of doctrinal authority the ultimate basis of which is experience.¹³ This tendency to discard Tradition as the ultimate determinant in the recognition of revealed truth, and to call in question the existence of any infallibility in the teaching Church, has been the cause of a considerable rapprochement between many Anglo-Catholics and the central Anglican position in which reason and sound learning are looked upon as the finally decisive means of this recognition. In the Report *Catholicity*, presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury by a representative group of Anglo-Catholic theologians, great emphasis is laid upon the necessity for unity of recovering the wholeness of the Catholic tradition, and there is much in this with which Catholics can agree. Yet there is a parallel unwillingness to define what is meant by the Church or, in consequence, to decide to what extent Tradition, or the Church's collective understanding of the Gospel, can be in any sense looked upon as a determinative magisterium giving certainty to its interpretation of the meaning of the biblical revelation. It is noteworthy that throughout this Report the question of the infallibility of the teaching Church is studiously evaded.¹⁴

Thus the intellectual movement in which during fifty years Anglo-Catholics, Liberals and Evangelicals have been involved,

13 Movement in the latter direction is illustrated in the writers of *Essays Catholic and Critical*, in Sir Will Spens' *Belief and Practice* and in *The Nature of Catholic Authority* by Canon Wilfrid Knox in *Theology*, February 1929.

14 *Catholicity—A Study in the Conflict of Christian Traditions in the West*. London 1947.

has made it possible for the Evangelical Report to conclude its section on the Bible and Authority with a summing up of its own position in the words of Canon C. H. Smyth, a member of the Anglo-Catholic group responsible for the Report *Catholicity*. These words are almost identical with those of Dr Bigg, already quoted, written nearly fifty years earlier. Commenting on Archbishop Parker, the architect of the Elizabethan settlement, Canon Smyth says:

'Parker, with a prescience rare in his generation, could perceive that the appeal to antiquity is compromised by the appeal to history, and he to some extent anticipated the conclusion of modern scholarship that Church History is a stream of development, and that at no point is it possible to draw a line across it and to say that what comes before that line is pure and what comes after it is corrupt. The weight of historic precedent is authoritative, but it is not conclusive: the final criterion is the Word of God.'¹⁵

Thus it would appear that many Anglo-Catholics and many Evangelicals now find themselves standing in this matter upon ground which is largely common to Anglicanism as a whole; tradition is certainly in some sense authoritative, it carries weight in the decision concerning what is to be believed, but its verdict is not conclusive. For these central Anglicans, in whatever particular group they are to be found, the ultimate test is Scripture; and the final authority in the interpretation of Scripture is human reason and learning believed to be sound. This can give to the individual Dr Salmon's homely certainty, of its nature liable to error, but not the objective certainty of God's infallible Word spoken by His Church.

On the other hand there are Anglo-Catholic scholars of considerable weight whose position in regard to Tradition is much more in accordance with our own. Some words of the late Dom Gregory Dix may be taken as representative of them:

'There seems to be a strict limit in history to the extent to which a local Church can ever afford to allow itself to become isolated from the general progress of Christian thought. The reception of the "Gospel" is neither a static nor a mechanical process. There is an organic advance, generation by generation, into its meaning, without any deviation from orthodoxy, which

¹⁵ *The Fullness of Christ*, page 63.

is part of the historical life of the Catholic Church. It is the heresies which usually represent some form of conservatism, some local refusal to advance beyond an old and inadequate understanding of the original "Gospel". The penalty when a particular Church loses contact, voluntarily or involuntarily, with that general stream of Christian life is severe. It is fossilization and ultimately death'.¹⁶

At first sight this passage contains little that is relevant to the modern situation of Christendom. It is its implications for the Church as a whole, whatever meaning we happen to attach to the word Church, which must be examined and made explicit. While central Anglicanism in company with world Protestantism refuses to Tradition, as Catholics understand it, any finally decisive power to discriminate between false and true doctrinal developments, and the Orthodox East clings to a Tradition which has become almost static, the Anglican Benedictine holds that Tradition must be a continuous organic growth, that it is preserved from error, and is therefore a permanent and secure guide to the meaning of the Scriptural revelation. Moreover in proportion as the continuing life of the Church is penetrated by it, the more vital will that life become, the more will it absorb and be actualized by divinely revealed truth. It is hardly necessary to say that this has a close affinity with what the Catholic Church understands by Tradition and its function in expressing the mind and fulfilling the life of the Church.¹⁷

How does this Catholic conception of Tradition as at once substantially Scriptural and unchanging, yet with implications continuously more clearly comprehended by the mind of the Church, compare with Tradition as understood by the Orthodox Church and by the Church of England? 'Tradition', says an eminent Orthodox theologian, 'does not merely consist of an oral transmission of facts capable of supplementing the biblical narrative. It is the complement of the Bible, and above all it is the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New Testament, as the Church becomes aware of it. It is tradition which confers the power of

¹⁶ *Jew and Greek—A Study in the Primitive Church* by Dom Gregory Dix, London 1953, page 67. The immediate reference is to the Nazarene Church, the heir in the second and third centuries of primitive Judaeo-Christianity.

¹⁷ In this connection see also a valuable Appendix (C) 'The Concept of Infallibility' in *Spiritual Authority in the Church of England* by Canon E. C. Rich, London 1953, page 209.

comprehension of the meaning of revealed truth (Luke xxiv, 45). Tradition tells us what we must hear and, still more important, how we must keep what we hear. In this general sense, tradition implies an incessant operation of the Holy Spirit, who could have his full outpouring and bear his fruits only in the Church, after the day of Pentecost.¹⁸ It is clear from this passage that, for the Orthodox, Tradition involves continuous interpretation and continuous increase of comprehension and awareness of the content of Scripture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet the Orthodox Church looks upon itself as pre-eminently the Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. We have already seen that up to the seventh Ecumenical Council in 789 it developed in doctrine, discipline and liturgy, on its own characteristic lines, in common with the rest of the Great Church in the West, but from that date, and more especially from the beginning of the schism, this development ceased. The Orthodox Church for eleven centuries has never attempted to hold a Council which claimed to be ecumenical; it has never, as a Church, formally and authoritatively defined doctrine. Its whole witness appears to be concentrated on the past, to cling to and conserve the ancient Faith. This it has done with wonderful fidelity and tenacity, but at the same time it seems to have largely lost the missionary sense of proclamation, and with it the capacity to develop and the desire to convert. In spite of its assertion that its unity is indivisible and unbreakable¹⁹ it can speak of the Church before the schism as the 'undivided Church'.²⁰ It is as if it recognized that by the schism it had lost a part of itself, and must remain static till that part is restored to its unity. On its side the Catholic Church has never repudiated the union agreed upon by representatives of East and West assembled at the Council of Florence in 1439. The schismatic bishops of the Orthodox Church have been invited to attend the assembly of Catholic Ecumenical Councils, as witnesses to the Faith. This occurred last before the Vatican Council met in 1870.²¹

18 V. Lossky: *Panagia, an Essay in The Mother of God*, edited by E. L. Mascall, London 1949, page 26.

19 Evanston Report, page 94.

20 *op. cit.*, page 93.

21 *The Vatican Council* by Cuthbert Butler, London 1930. Volume I, pages 93-94. The Patriarch of Constantinople, and the other Patriarchs with him, refused the invitation on the ground that the only basis of reunion must be that the Western Church revert in doctrine and practice to the norm existing before the schism, giving up all that has been added since then.

The Church of England, as we have seen, acknowledges only a divisible and divided Church. In consequence some Anglicans take the teaching magisterium of the Church as the ultimate criterion of true and false development, but restrict its operation to the age of the 'undivided Church'. Others reject this as a final standard, and are compelled to fall back upon sound learning as the only means by which the Scriptural revelation can be interpreted. The result is inability to agree, except within very elastic limits, upon what is and what is not fundamental in doctrine and discipline. A small book by Professor H. A. Hodges of Reading recently published,²² contains an able and penetrating analysis of the nature of the Church of England clearly showing how, throughout its history since the Elizabethan settlement, and as a result of its constitution and ethos then established, it has halted between two opinions, unable to choose between the Catholic and Protestant alternatives it had partially embraced. Professor Hodges sees very clearly that if it is to retain the Catholic elements in its character, as he would wish it to do, it cannot do so of itself. His judgment is that to solve in a Catholic direction the complex of opposites of which it is now composed, it must move towards union with and absorption by the historic tradition of Christendom, as represented by the Orthodox Church. It must indeed *become* Orthodox, though in a Western mode and setting. For Professor Hodges there are in the Orthodox Church no signs of arrested development; he scouts the very idea. 'That Faith to which the Orthodox Fathers bear witness, and of which the Orthodox Church is the abiding custodian, is the Christian Faith in its true and essential form'.²³ He shows no sign of recognizing, even as a possibility, that, since the schism, the Orthodox Church has by implication thought of itself as the only true Church, but an incomplete Church, unconsciously awaiting the completion of its unity by reintegration with Western Christendom and the Apostolic See of Rome. It is not therefore altogether surprising that Professor Hodges' rejection of the Catholic Church as the true home of Eastern Orthodoxy, and of the elements of Catholicism retained and greatly developed by the Church of England, is as little deeply considered as it seems to us cavalier. It is not deeply

²² *Anglicanism and Orthodoxy*, a study in dialectical Churchmanship by H. A. Hodges, S.C.M. Press, 1955.

²³ *op. cit.*, page 47.

considered, for its description of the medieval Church as 'a great machine which went on working independently of the masses of the people, performing spiritual functions for their benefit, but not needing or inviting their participation'²⁴ is a caricature so startling that no historian would accept it without qualifications that would substantially alter its character. It is cavalier because of its dismissal of the claims of the Roman See, the very heart of the Catholic position, without argument, and without a hint at the amount of acceptance that has in fact been accorded them by the East from Chalcedon to Florence.

We have seen that throughout Christian history, from the first Pentecost, down the centuries, till today, there has been a continuous element of interpretation of the Faith once for all delivered to the Saints, by which its doctrines have been perceived more clearly in the mind of the Church. The deviations from this continuity in the rest of Christendom; the arrested development of the Orthodox Church, and the lack of a criterion of true and false development in the Churches of the Reformation, all serve to confirm Catholics in their belief that the continuity of development retained by the Catholic Church, a continuity of Faith and Apostolic hierarchy, makes it one with the Church founded and guaranteed by the authority of Christ himself and identical in very truth with his Mystical Body.

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This article will be concluded next month by a discussion of the relevance of the principle of doctrinal development to the doctrine of our Lady's place in the economy of redemption.

²⁴ *op. cit.*, page 43.