

Guardian Angels and Carrotburgers: Two Views of the Role of the Magisterium

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John Henry Cardinal Newman died on 11 August, 1890. In the summer of the centenary of his death the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*. It is a topic by which Newman was much exercised. In this article I would like to look at the *Instruction* in the light of two ideas adumbrated by Newman, each of which involves a distinction between positive and negative models of the role of the Magisterium.

The Vatican Council of 1870 was a major landslide in the history of Catholic theology, and for much of the following decade Newman was riding the after-shocks generated by its definition of papal infallibility. His central concern was to assimilate what he understood to be the true teaching of the decree *Pastor Aeternus* into a structure which would still allow scope for theological responsibility. In November 1874 an intemperate pamphlet by William Gladstone gave Newman an opening for a formal and public statement of his reaction to the definition. *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation* was dated 27 December 1874 and was published in January 1875.¹ In the *Letter* Newman was of course particularly concerned with infallibility, ecclesial and papal, rather than with magisterial teaching in general, but his reflections are of wider application.²

Newman observes that authoritative statements may be either positive or negative:

The infallibility, whether of the Church or of the Pope, acts principally or solely in two channels, in direct statements of truth, and in the condemnation of error. The former takes the shape of doctrinal definitions, the latter stigmatizes propositions as heretical, next to heresy, erroneous, and the like.³

The significant observation is that these two kinds of statements are of markedly different character. The negative statements are specific and concrete; what is to be rejected is a particular position maintained by particular theologians within a particular historical context. The affirmative statements are by contrast 'general' and 'more or less abstract'. They have fuzzy edges, and their implications are not written on their face.

In each case there is theological work to be done. In the case of negative statements, it is 'the intensely concrete character of the matters condemned' which provides what Newman calls 'the opportunity of a legitimate minimizing'. What is condemned is a specific formulation, a thesis 'when taken as a whole, or, again, when viewed in its context'.

Theologians employ themselves in determining what precisely it is that is condemned in that thesis or treatise; ... that determination is not *de fide*; all that is of faith is that there is in that thesis itself, which is noted, heresy or error, or other peccant matter, as the case may be, such, that the censure is a peremptory command to theologians, preachers, students, and all other whom it concerns, to keep clear of it.

'Affirmative enunciations', on the other hand, are abstract and need to be cashed.

Indeed, excepting such as relate to persons, that is, to the Trinity in Unity, the Blessed Virgin, the Saints, and the like, all the dogmas of Pope or of Council are but general, and so far, in consequence, admit of exceptions in their general application, —these exceptions being determined either by other authoritative utterances, or by the scrutinizing vigilance, acuteness, and subtlety of the *Schola Theologorum*.⁴

The 1870 definition itself would have provided Newman with a case in point. It related to a particular person, the Pope, but what it said about that particular person needed to be delimited and applied. Which papal statements were infallible and which were not had to be determined by the history of 'other authoritative utterances' and by the work of the *Schola Theologorum*. It would prove to be a long process, a process which is even now, one Council and twelve decades later, far from complete.

We might add that among the 'exceptions' to be determined are circumstances in which the language of these 'affirmative enunciations' does not seem to apply at all—situations in which it might seem to be more appropriate or more illuminating or even more truthful to use an alternative formulation. The salient fact is that all these positive statements, even 'such as relate to persons', do admit of such alternatives.

That is true because Newman's two kinds of statements bind in very different ways. A negative statement—a condemned proposition, an anathema—tells the theologian what he must not say. A positive statement, however, does not tell him what he *must* say; it only tells him what he *may* say. It provides a model, a pattern, of an appropriate way of talking. It supplies a vocabulary or commends a style. But, provided the validity of that way of talking is never denied, the theologian is not bound to reproduce it as it stands. Other vocabularies, other theological styles, other ways of talking may be equally appropriate. No positive

statement can exhaustively describe the truth which it seeks to articulate.⁵

This can be illustrated from two classical instances of definition. The Council of Nicaea in 325 produced both positive teaching, in the form of a creed, and negative statements, in the form of an appended list of seven (or eight, depending how you count) anathematised propositions. The most distinctive, and the most provocative, affirmation of the creed was the consubstantiality of Father and Son. And yet for many years Athanasius, the great champion of Nicene orthodoxy, was conspicuously chary of the formula. In his major anti-Arian polemic, for example, the three Orations *Against the Arians*, the word *homoousios* appears but once.⁶ Of course the status of Nicaea in particular and the nature of conciliar authority in general were matters which had to be worked out in the course of debate, but, for a quarter of a century or so after 325, the Council's negative statements fed into that debate in a way in which its positive affirmations did not.

A second example is provided by the course of Christological discussion in the Greek East in the century and a half after Chalcedon. The definition of 451 rejected what the Council was pleased to see as the opposing errors of Nestorius and Eutyches and proposed a positive Christological statement. And yet, within the confines of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, there was a drift towards an ever more unitive, 'Cyrilline' Christology. The negative statements of the Council—its rejection of Nestorius and Eutyches—provided the parameters within which discussion was conducted, but that discussion soon moved beyond the static and balanced formulae of the Council's positive teaching.⁷ Many of those who accepted the Council felt an obligation to defend rather than to appropriate its positive affirmations.

Positive statements, then, are prescriptive in a much weaker sense than that in which negative statements are proscriptive. Positive statements may prove to be creative, but it is negative statements which have purchase on the history of doctrine.

Newman's second distinction involves the mechanism by which infallibility is underpinned. He distinguishes between the infallibility of the Apostles, on the one hand, and that of the Church, on the other, an infallibility which is called, 'in the case of the Apostles, inspiration; in the case of the Church *assistentia*'. The former 'was of a far more positive and wide character' than the latter; it was 'inward', a 'direct suggestion of divine truth'. The infallibility, even of bishops in Council, is, by contrast, a negative concept. It is

simply an external guardianship, keeping them off from error (as a man's Guardian Angel, without enabling him to walk, might, on a night journey, keep him from pitfalls in his way), a guardianship saving them, as far as their ultimate decisions are concerned, from the effects of their inherent infirmities, from any chance of extravagance, of confusion of thought, of collision with former decisions or with Scripture, which in

seasons of excitement might reasonably be feared.

... Since the process of defining truth is human, it is open to the chance of error; what Providence has guaranteed is only this, that there should be no error in the final step, in the resulting definition or dogma.⁸

In the *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* these distinctions are obscured. The result is a document which is concerned with the responsibility of theologians,⁹ but which leaves little room for the doing of responsible theology.

Let us begin with the notion of 'assistance'. The Magisterium enjoys this divine assistance 'in the integral exercise of its mission' (24). The 'assistance of the Holy Spirit' enables the 'Church's Pastors' to 'fulfill their assigned task of teaching the Gospel and authentically interpreting Revelation.' A special instance is the 'charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals' (15). That is, of course, no more than was said by Vatican I and Vatican II.¹⁰

But the *Instruction* also speaks of assistance in non-infallible teaching, and it does so in terms which suggest, not a safeguard which is negative and external, like the interpositions of a guardian angel, but rather a power source which is internal and enabling.

Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and in a particular way, to the Roman Pontiff as Pastor of the whole Church, when exercising their ordinary Magisterium, even should this not issue in an infallible definition or in a 'definitive' pronouncement but in the proposal of some teaching which leads to a better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals and to moral directives derived from such teaching.¹¹

Presumably this means not merely that divine assistance, like Newman's guardian angel, keeps magisterial teaching from going radically wrong, but rather that it somehow empowers the teaching authority and so facilitates that 'better understanding of Revelation' which is its object.

Certainly this assistance is conceived of as setting magisterial teaching above the hurly-burly of mere theology. Thus, the *Instruction* affirms the 'principle' that such teaching, 'by virtue of divine assistance, has a validity beyond its argumentation, which may derive at times from a particular theology' (34).

It would seem, then, that, instead of the notion of an essentially negative kind of assistance, filling the role of a guardian angel, there is in the *Instruction* a model of positive assistance, enhancing theological performance. The Spirit is to the magisterial authority what the magic potion is to Asterix or what spinach is to Popeye.

Newman's other distinction is obscured as well, for the *Instruction* does not discriminate between negative formulations and positive ones. Thus, the Magisterium has 'the task of religiously guarding [a] negative

function] and loyally expounding [a positive function] the deposit of divine Revelation' (16). It must 'set forth the Gospel's teaching, guard its integrity, and thereby protect the faith of the People of God' (37). It teaches in order 'to aid a better understanding of Revelation and make explicit its contents, or to recall how some teaching is in conformity with the truths of faith, or finally to guard against ideas that are incompatible with these truths' (23).

No distinction need be made in the *Instruction* between the way in which negative statements work and the way in which positive statements work because the model is in each case the same: truth flows out from the magisterial wellhead. And that means that the theologian is stripped of his proper job.

To be sure, the *Instruction* affirms that theology is a 'true and proper science', a 'discipline' with 'rigorous critical standards' (9). Theology and the Magisterium have 'different gifts and functions' (21); they have 'diverse natures and missions and cannot be confused' (40). But in fact they seem to occupy the same space.

The theologian's 'role is to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church' (6), while a task of the Magisterium is, as we have seen, 'the proposal of some teaching which leads to a better understanding of Revelation' (17). The similarity is significant.

There is said to be a 'reciprocal relationship' between the theologian and the Magisterium. The Magisterium

authentically teaches the doctrine of the Apostles. And, benefiting from the work of theologians, it refutes objections to and distortions of the faith and promotes, with the authority received from Jesus Christ, new and deeper comprehension, clarification, and application of revealed doctrine. Theology, for its part, gains, by way of reflection, an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the Scripture and handed on faithfully by the Church's living Tradition under the guidance of the Magisterium. Theology strives to clarify the teaching of Revelation with regard to reason and gives it finally an organic and systematic form (21).

It is difficult to see in the discussion any real differentiation in the theological and magisterial offices. Both are engaged in the rather elusive task of acquiring 'deeper' understanding of revealed truth. Beyond that, theologians seem to have the job of supplying raw materials at one end of the cycle and selling the product at the other. These raw materials are to be used in both the positive and the negative work of the Magisterium, for, on the one hand, theologians provide arguments which can be used against people (to refute objections and distortions) and, on the other hand, supply ideas which can be reissued, stamped with a seal of magisterial approval (to promote 'with the authority received from Jesus

Christ' new and deeper understanding).

At the other end of the manufacturing process, theologians 'clarify' and tidy up, giving the Church's teaching 'an organic and systematic form'. The latter phrase may suggest a pedagogical function. At least, the *Instruction* insists that one of theology's prime tasks is evangelistic. In addition to helping the Magisterium refute objections, theology 'seeks the "reasons of faith" and offers these reasons as a response to those seeking them', thereby making 'its contribution so that the faith might be communicated' (7). The 'contribution' of theologians 'is needed more than ever, for evangelization on a world scale requires the efforts of the whole People of God' (40).

The fantasy that haunted Newman's ecclesial nightmares was of a papal despotism. The fantasy that belongs to our age is of a vast multinational with an efficient corporate structure and a product to sell. Perhaps we should think of a global fast-food chain. If it is centrally decided that a waiting world needs carrotburgers, the managers of local branches from Moscow to Beverly Hills have the job of shifting carrotburgers. If a curial Ronald McDonald decides on 'the proposal of some teaching which leads to a better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals' (17), it becomes the job of theologians to sell it.

Because in this scheme of things the theologian and the Magisterium occupy essentially the same space, the relationship between them is inevitably seen as one either of dependence or of competition.¹² The former of these alternatives is called 'collaboration'. When a theologian is granted a 'canonical mission', officially authorising him to teach, 'such collaboration' is even raised to the level of 'participation in the work of the Magisterium' (22).

If a theologian has 'serious difficulties, for reasons which appear to him well-founded, in accepting a non-irreformable magisterial teaching' (28), his only mode of participation is silence. 'Dissent', at least public or organised dissent, is simply ruled out. If, 'despite a loyal effort on the theologian's part, the difficulties persist', he must turn, not to the 'mass media', but 'to the responsible authority'. If he makes his difficulties 'known to the Magisterial authorities', 'his objections could then contribute to real progress and provide a stimulus to the Magisterium to propose the teaching of the Church in greater depth and with a clearer presentation of the arguments' (30). As a last resort, such a theologian may have to 'suffer for the truth, in silence and prayer, but with the certainty, that if the truth really is at stake, it will ultimately prevail' (31).

In other words, the theologian's concern may, if he is lucky, help 'the responsible authority' to get it even more right next time. Otherwise, he must lie back and close his eyes and think of the Kingdom.

The perceived alternative to collaboration is a kind of sibling rivalry. The *Instruction* expresses anxiety about the notion of 'a kind of "parallel magisterium" of theologians' operating 'in opposition to and

in competition with the authentic magisterium' (34).

It is significant that this danger is imagined to arise from the view that 'the interventions of the Magisterium ... have their origin in one theology among many theologies, while no particular theology ... could presume to claim universal normative status' (34). Behind the rejection of this view again lies a failure to distinguish between negative statements and positive ones, between the way in which magisterial statements can operate proscriptively and the way in which they can operate prescriptively.

Because this distinction is not made, the *Instruction* is forced to assume the existence of some sort of non-particular theology,¹³ some universally normative super-language, at the disposal of the Magisterium. But that cannot be. Theology is God-talk. Talk uses words, and words have histories and resonances and cultural connotations. The Word became flesh, and the words which we use when we speak of Him are themselves incarnate in time and place.

Newman was vividly aware of the complexity of all theological language. We have seen that, in his understanding, there was a necessary complementarity between the functions of the Magisterium and of the *Schola Theologorum*. 'Affirmative enunciations' of the Magisterium are 'general' and 'abstract' and need to be delimited. 'Negative enunciations' are 'intensely concrete' and need to be incorporated into a broader theological structure.

In both cases there is a necessary interaction between positive and negative, abstract and concrete. In both cases an assertion of the Magisterium and the work of the theologian combine to form a meaningful whole. There is perhaps a model in the relation of matter and form.

From the point of view of the *Instruction*, Platonic forms and the particular things which express them might seem to provide the appropriate analogy. The non-particular theology of the Magisterium, with its claim to 'universal normative status', is expressed or embodied in the work of various theologians. Since they, unlike Popeye or Asterix, have no access to spinach or magic potions, their work is inevitably marked by the particularities of time and place.¹⁴

A better analogy would perhaps be provided if we were to think of the Aristotelian fusion of matter and form to produce a particular thing. In this analogy, a magisterial statement, positive or negative, would correspond to matter—passive; inert; just sitting there, if you like, in all its brute facticity; but open to the reception of a variety of possible forms. As matter and form must combine to produce a really existing thing, so the material statement must be fused with theological reflection in order to produce discourse which has reality and life and power.

The Scholastics used the same notion of matter and form as a way of understanding the structure of a grammatical sentence. The subject was as matter, undefined, indeterminate, open to the reception of various

predicates. 'Fred' as the proposed subject of a sentence just sits there, waiting for something to be said about him. Predicates like 'is a member of Leicestershire County Cricket Club' or 'rides a horse called Nellie' or 'was bowled by a googly' just float around, waiting to be grounded by being attached to something. It is only when the two combine that a meaningful sentence is produced.

Perhaps in a way which is partly analogous, positive statements of the Magisterium are waiting to be qualified or paraphrased by the predication of various theological visions, as it was the work of generations of Greek theologians after 451 to produce Christological or soteriological or anthropological discourse of the form 'The Chalcedonian definition is not incompatible with the Cyrilline vision that ...' Perhaps negative statements of the Magisterium are waiting to be inserted into an interpretative framework and so given positive meaning, as theologians after Nicaea could say 'The rejection of the idea that "there was when He was not" suggests ...' Perhaps it is by that sort of predication that meaningful theological discourse is produced.

The notion of matter and form gave Aristotle and the Scholastics a way of understanding stability and flux, continuity and discontinuity, in a world of process and change. Perhaps the analogy has some point as a way of approaching the problems of continuity and discontinuity, development and change, in the history of the Church's faith.

These remarks are only suggestive. But what they are intended to suggest is that the *Schola Theologorum*, if true to its ecclesial vocation, has more to do with its time than sell carrotburgers or lie back and think of the Kingdom. Newman's discussion of the definition of 1870 ends with these words:

To be a true Catholic a man must have a generous loyalty towards ecclesiastical authority, and accept what is taught him with what is called the *pietas fidei*, and only such a tone of mind has a claim, and it certainly has a claim, to be met and to be handled with a wise and gentle *minimism*. Still the fact remains, that there has been of late years a fierce and intolerant temper abroad, which scorns and virtually tramples on the little ones of Christ.¹⁵

- 1 For the *Letter* and its context, see Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (London, 1912), II. 401–409, and Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman, A Biography* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 679–92.
- 2 The *Instruction* clearly regards that which can be said of infallibility in particular as a special case of that which can be said of magisterial authority in general. Note, for example, the following:
Jesus Christ promised the assistance of the Holy Spirit to the Church's Pastors so that they could fulfill their assigned task of teaching the Gospel and authentically interpreting Revelation. In particular, He bestowed on them the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals (15).
- 3 John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on*

Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation (London, 1875), p. 120. From 1876 the *Letter* was reprinted in Volume II of *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* in the uniform edition of Newman's works. I will cite from the first edition, with the corresponding reference to Volume II of *Difficulties Felt by Anglicans* (New edition, London, 1892) added in brackets; here the latter reference is to p. 333.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 121 (333—4).

5 I tried to develop this point in my article 'On the Function of Heresy', *New Blackfriars* 70 (1989), p. 103.

6 Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 1.9 (= P.G. 26, 29A). For a traditional statement of the view that Athanasius 'consciously (it must have been consciously) kept himself clear of *homoousios*' till the early 350's, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed., London, 1972), pp. 257—58. The dating of the Athanasian corpus has in recent years become a controverted question, but his reticence in works like *Contra Arianos* remains a fact.

7 The classic statement of this development is Charles Moeller, 'Le chalcédonisme et le néo-chalcédonisme en Orient de 451 à la fin du VI^e siècle', in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon, Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Aloys Grillmeier S.J. and Henrich Bacht S.J., Vol. 1 (Würzburg, 1951), pp. 637—720. See Aloys Grillmeier S.J., *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. II, *From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590—604)*, Part 1, tr. Pauline Allen and John Cawte.

8 *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, pp. 116—17 (327—28).

9 See, for example, paragraphs 22 and 40.

10 According to *Pastor Aeternus*, the Pope enjoys his infallibility 'through the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter' (Denzinger-Schönmetzer 3074); for *Lumen Gentium*, papal definitions are irreformable 'as put forth under the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised to him in blessed Peter' (25).

11 *Instruction* 17. Vatican II asserts that the Magisterium hears, guards, and expounds the Word of God 'from the Divine command and with the Holy Spirit assisting' (*Dei Verbum* 10). The phrase 'Spiritu Sancto assistente' used here of the general functioning of the Magisterium is not quite the same thing as 'sub assistentia Spiritus Sancti', found in *Lumen Gentium* 25 (cited in n. 10 above) with reference to infallibility in particular. We might recall the distinction Newman draws between inspiration as the infallibility characteristic of the Apostles and a more general sense of the word 'inspiration' in which it is common to all members of the Church, and therefore especially to its Bishops, and still more directly to its rulers, when solemnly called together in Council ... (*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, pp. 116—117 (327)).

12 Indeed, the fourth and longest chapter of the document, on 'The Magisterium and Theology', has two subsections: the first is entitled 'Collaborative Relations' and the second 'The Problem of Dissent'.

13 It will be recalled that the *Instruction* also asserts that 'Magisterial teaching, by virtue of divine assistance, has a validity beyond its argumentation, which may derive at times from a particular theology' (34).

14 When the *Instruction* claims that 'essential bonds link the distinct levels of unity of faith, unity-plurality of expressions of the faith, and plurality of theologies' (34), it fails to make clear how an expression of faith can avoid being also the expression of a particular theology. That 'expression of faith' may use theological language which is more comprehensive or less, but it cannot eschew the use of such language.

15 *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, p. 125 (339).