

## Von Balthasar and the Office of Peter in the Church

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### I

Hans Urs von Balthasar is widely regarded as the most influential Catholic theologian of the post-Conciliar period. In the early 1970s, Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, Louis Bouyer and others founded the international theological revue *Communio* in order to promote a more balanced, centrist and ‘authentically Catholic’ reception of the Council than was taking place through *Concilium* which they judged to be infected with ideological and secular agendas out of keeping with the genuine Catholic tradition. The influence of this *Communio* movement has been considerable, with Cardinal Ratzinger’s subsequent position as head of the Congregation of the Faith and the influence Balthasar’s writings have exercised on Papal teaching: the Vatican rejection of the ordination of women, for example, derives in part from a Balthasarian account of gender-symbolism, and his influence can be easily seen in sections of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (He is said to be Pope John Paul II’s favourite theologian.<sup>1</sup>) *Communio* theology is now the form in which current Catholic orthodoxy is being expressed: hence the relevance of this paper on Balthasar’s account of the office of Peter and its exercise of authority.

### II

*‘The Pope is head. Who else is known by all? Who else is recognized by all, with the power to infiltrate the whole body because he holds the main branch which infiltrates everywhere? How easy it would have been for this to degenerate into tyranny! That is why Christ gave them this commandment: ‘But it shall not be so with you (Lk 22.26).’ (Blaise Pascal, Pensées, L569)*

The English title of von Balthasar’s work, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, ignores the point of the original German title: *Der antiromische affekt* (‘The Anti-Roman Attitude’).<sup>2</sup> The work was originally published in 1974 (in the pontificate of Paul VI) to offer a theological reflection on the ‘deep-seated anti-Roman attitude within the Catholic Church’, ‘the strangely irrational phenomenon of the anti-Roman attitude among Catholics’ (16), an attitude that has ‘not only sociological and historical grounds but also a *theological* basis’ and that ‘has to be overcome again and again by the community of the Church’ (9). ‘Throughout Church history, and today more explicitly than ever, there has been an evident *contest* within the Church herself, mostly against the Petrine principle...’ (314). He presses the Church to examine the bias in its nature against its central focus of authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul takes the unusual step of citing him in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

<sup>2</sup> The references in the text are to *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (Ignatius Press, 1986).

In Balthasar's view, the Papacy is misrepresented if it is pictured at the top of an ecclesial pyramid: he regards this as a legacy of Imperial Rome and a reaction to the encroachments of medieval emperors. Such an image distorts the relation of the Papacy to the rest of the Church because the Pope is not 'above' the Church in any serious sense, nor is the Church 'under' him ('..but it shall not be so with you.' (Lk 22.26). Only Jesus stands above the Church as its Lord (308). Equally, Balthasar has little time for attempts to remove the *scandalon* of the Petrine Office by softening it into an Orthodox 'honorary primacy' based upon the autonomy of particular churches (77). Instead, the Papacy is one of the elements within the complex identity of the Church: it is both a *primary* feature of the Church as 'the guarantor of concrete unity in the concrete centre of the Church' (127), and *relative*, 'one of several indispensable elements in the ecclesiastical structure' which, by their very relationship to one another constitute the Church's identity (21). Hence both Protestantism and Papolatry are unacceptable, because they dissolve the differentiated character of the Church, one by excising episcopal and papal authority from the structure, the other by exalting the Pope above everything else. He quotes Möhler's sharp comment on their common source in an exaggerated egoism:

Protestantism is papism carried to the extreme, that is, complete egoism *in principle*. In papism each gives himself unconditionally to *one* person: in Protestantism, each *one* is in a position to oppose all others (insofar as he makes of himself the principle of interpretation of revelation) (172).

He prefers to speak of the 'multi-dimensional reality' of the church' (26) the 'force-fields that bear upon the church' (22), the 'network of tensions in the Church'(24). In the Church, there are 'more fundamental tensions' than that between primacy and collegiality or 'monarchy' and 'democracy' (sociological parallels from secular society are dismissed by him as inadequate to the *mysterium*). In his view, the *necessary* tensions in the Church are neither the symptoms of spiritual shortcomings nor flaws which can be remedied by structural change: they are constitutive of the Church because the Church is inherently *a complex, multi-dimensional network of principles* which, in their interaction constitute the reality of the Church founded by Christ. (He rejects the idea that the original form of the Church was a charismatic brotherhood of equality, only later corrupted by patriarchal patterns of government. Instead, the Church as shaped by Christ in its period of origins is differentiated and invested with centres of authority, adjudication and service.)

He presents an account of the Church in which Mary, Peter and the other figures around Jesus form a network of principles which, in their mutuality, interaction and tension, form the Church which relates to its Lord. Balthasar approves of Congar's definition of Catholicity as 'the dynamic universality of the principles which yield her unity' (323); and proposes an ecclesiology of symbolic archetypes as a way of identifying these constitutive principles and missions which form the *Catholica*.

### III

His approach is simple: the 'larger unity' of the Church corresponds to the 'constellation' of persons around Jesus in the New Testament, a constellation of 'real symbols' which designate particular missions within the Church, forming the dimensions of the *Catholica* (309). The historical Jesus stands within a 'constitutive human group'; withdrawing him from this differentiated network makes him (and Christology) 'hopelessly abstract' (136). The Church is born in the relationships Christ establishes in 'the period of origins' (158) and their symbolic pattern forms the subsequent pattern of the Church in which the Risen Jesus continues to give missions: it is this subsistent pattern of continuity between 'then' and 'now' which makes them constitutive *principles* of the Church in every age.

An analogy can be drawn between Balthasar's ecclesiological approach and that adopted by Carl Jung in his account of the process of individuation. For Jung, all the elements which surface in a dream are aspects of the self which press for attention: becoming 'individuated' as a person means being coming to acknowledge the self in all the aspects of its fullness. Just as the self is complex, composed of different dynamic aspects, all of which emerge from and contribute to a process of integrated personality, so the Church has internal dimensions, all of which belong together in a dynamic interchange and tension. These dimensions come to light in the figures who are archetypal dimensions in the 'individuation' of the Church. (Significantly, one of Balthasar's essays is entitled 'Who is the Church?' rather than 'What is the Church?' because he favours imagery of the Church as Virgin/Spouse/Mother -- a 'person' rather than an 'assembly' -- in relation to God.)

He identifies a number of individuals in the New Testament and amplifies their symbolic significance as foundational archetypes within the Church: Mary, Joseph, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary, the Jews who were sympathetic to him (Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Simon of Cyrene), Judas Iscariot, John the Baptist, Peter, the Twelve, Paul, the Beloved Disciple, James, etc. The following diagram gives an idea of the resulting picture of the *Catholica*:

## **ARCHETYPES WITHIN THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH**

### **PETER**

*(Pastoral Office)*

### **THE TWELVE**

*(Collegiality)*

### **PAUL**

*(Adaptation to Cultures/Mission)*

### **THE BAPTIST**

*(OT Witness; Prophetic Martyrdom)*

### **JUDAS**

*(Betrayal)*

### **OUTSIDERS**

*(Sinners & Weak)*

### **CHILDREN**

*(Unlettered)*

### **MARY**

*(Lay holiness)*

### **NICODEMUS**

*(Searchers)*

### **WOMEN AT TOMB**

*(Generating Resurrection Faith)*

### **JOSEPH**

*(Fatherhood/Work)*

### **MARTHA & MARY**

*(Domestic Church/Hospitality)*

### **BELOVED DISCIPLE**

*(Love/Contemplation)*

### **JAMES**

*(Tradition & Law)*

Mary is at the centre of the Church because her faith represents ‘the all-inclusive, protective and directive form of all ecclesial life’ (208), ‘the model of all being and acting’ in the Church (206). Think of the form of her faith radiating through the other dimensions which do not have the paradigmatic quality of Marian holiness. The Church, after all, begins in the chamber at Nazareth in the faith of the Virgin ‘through which the Son of God becomes man’, and by which ‘he also forms the truly universal Church’ (207). The first of the redeemed, she is the ‘archetype of the Church’, the body image of the Church’s holiness, realised in advance through her conception without sin and fulfilled in her Assumption into resurrection life. In her is seen ‘the nuptial encounter between God and the creature’. ‘The entire Church is Marian’, Balthasar says, quoting Charles Journet (205), because ‘Mary disappears into the heart of the Church to remain there as a real presence which, however, always gives place to her Son’ (158-9). For von Balthasar, the radiant heart of the Church is *lay, faithful and holy*, characterised by contemplative receptivity in relation to God, and symbolised by the femininity and virginal maternity of Mary: as she is, so is the church.

A brief comment on Balthasar’s use of male-female symbolism: this can pose problems in a society uncertain about these terms in its own cultural life, but his fundamental distinction is between ‘a feminine element .. [which] makes a person *secure* in nature and in being’, and a masculine element by which a person ‘pushes forward into things in order to change them by implanting and imposing something of its own’.<sup>3</sup> At the level of individual identity, then, it corresponds to *who you are* and *what you do*. Mary symbolises the Church in its core identity: simply by being herself in perfect union with God’s self-gift in Christ, she expresses the identity of the Church. Within this overarching Marian pattern, the other dimensions arise as active expressions of its selfhood, just as personal identity flows into action. Hence, for example, Balthasar can think of Papal infallibility as arising within the trustworthiness of what is known in the Marian Church: ‘What Peter will receive as “infallibility” for his office of governing will be a partial share in the total flawlessness of the feminine, Marian church’.<sup>4</sup> In the same spirit, one might say that the women at the tomb on Easter morning who generate the Church’s faith in the Resurrection speak of what Mary already knows of God’s power and love. Similarly, John’s contemplative discipleship, James’ sense that Christ is the fulfilment of Jewish observance and Paul’s preaching of the universal efficacy of faith in Christ are particular expressions of what is comprehended in Mary’s faith.<sup>5</sup>

Peter has a distinctive role, set within the network of missions in the Church:

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<sup>3</sup> An extract from *New Elucidations* reproduced in *Communio*, 22 (1995), p.165

<sup>4</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.167

<sup>5</sup> I can only touch on the role of those principles which bear upon authority in the Church, but it is important to note the presence of ‘sinners’ within a communion called to holiness -- omit them, and you create the Church of the righteous elect; the presence of Judas requires constant acknowledgement; the women at the tomb responsible for first proclaiming the resurrection to the Church is an important symbol of the role of women in the Church and the Josephite dimension of fatherhood and work has been an equally unexplored aspect of the *Catholica*.

‘As shepherd who has to pasture the *whole* flock, he has a right to claim authority (in doctrine and leadership) and to demand unity. This prerogative is his alone. But it does not isolate him from the others who have founding missions and who, in their own way, have no less a continuing life and representation in the church’ (158)

The office of Peter, he argues, ‘must take his bearings by the all-encompassing totality of the Church, which expresses itself concretely in the dynamic interplay of her major missions and in the laws inherent in her structure’ (314-5). While he develops this, several alternative configurations are rejected as inadequate: he rejects a neo-scholastic division of the Church into a ‘teaching’ (*ecclesia discens*) and a ‘listening’ part (*ecclesia docens*), preferring a ‘much more nuanced scale of ministries in the Church’ (236): yet even the New Testament triads of ‘apostles, prophets, teachers’ (1 Cor 12.28 and ‘evangelists, pastors, teachers’ (Eph 4.11) are insufficient in his view to account for the scale of differentiation within the *Catholica*. Nor does he accept the typological division of the universal Church into ‘Petrine’ (Catholic), ‘Pauline’ (Protestant) and ‘Johannine’ (Orthodox) Churches (146). Paul and John are not to be thought of as principles ‘tending in opposite directions’ from Peter: *communio* is not incompatible with collegiality and primacy. But the office of Peter is not the defining feature of the Catholic Church, as though a Pauline stamp were characteristic of Protestantism and Johannine contemplation the feature of Orthodoxy:

...the communion of the *Catholica* cannot be characterized exclusively by the Petrine principle and thereby placed in opposition to other Christian communions and communities (145-6)

It is precisely the task of the Church to realize its Catholicity in ways which bring together the Petrine, Pauline, Johannine and other dimensions within a concrete unity. Petrine authority is at the service of the other dimensions of the Church and it flourishes when it promotes the functioning of the other missions and dimensions within the Church. When it marginalises itself from them—for example, by acting as though they had no proper status within the life of the Church—or when it is marginalised by them—a not uncommon attitude in some parts of the Western Church—the *Catholica* becomes as dysfunctional as a family in which the father has no role.

The authority linked with the Petrine office is *one* of those principles, but it is not the centre of the Church’s identity: faithful union with Christ, embodied in Mary, not Peter, is the archetypal centre of the Church. He recognises that it is ‘difficult to keep the office of Peter in balance within the integral unity of the Church’ because the Petrine office has frequently drawn energy to itself at the expense of other principles. He aims to restore a better balance to the Church’s image of itself and speaks of the particularly Catholic concern of ‘balancing *Petrus* with *Maria-ecclesia*’, thereby enabling the Roman aspect to stand in a right relationship to the more fundamental Marian dimension and to the other principles in the Church. The more the Petrine office asserted itself, from Gregory VII onward he says, the more difficult it has been to keep sight of the Marian, and the other, equally valid, dimensions and missions in the Church which counterbalance juridical authority within the *mysterium* (184). He is aware of the difficulty of the task:

... how can the office of Peter, without negating itself [i.e., without abandoning the trajectory of Papal authority expressed in Vatican I and Vatican II], come down from the top of the pyramid where it is usually pictured, and where, for so long, it has seen itself? (127)

By displacing the Petrine office from the 'centre' or 'top' of the Church, Balthasar aims to restore a balance to ecclesiology which an over-judicial, Ultramontane approach to Papal authority has inhibited. By placing the Papacy within the 'larger unity' of the Church—'relativising' it, as he puts it, without marginalising it — he thereby restores to the heart of the Church the dimension of lay holiness and faith embodied in Mary and sets the Papacy within a network of other, equally valid principles and missions. Participation in the 'all-embracing form' of Mary's faith, not the act of obedient acceptance of Peter's authority, is the deepest dimension of the Church's identity. He argues that one nourishes the other—the Church is both Marian and Petrine—and that they are not to be opposed, but the issue of which is *central* is a necessary clarification in order to avoid an exaggerated estimate of Papal authority:

While this office [of Peter] is definitely not the centre, it must be rooted and maintained *in* the centre to become the criterion, the concrete point of reference for unity (and without it unity would fall apart), thus leading beyond itself to *the* centre, Christ, and liberating people for Christian freedom. (287)

#### IV

*'If the Church is regarded as one, then the Pope, as its head, represents the whole; if it is regarded as multiple, then the Pope is only a part. The Fathers sometimes looked at it in one way and sometimes another, and thus spoke in different ways about the Pope.*

*But in laying down one of these two truths, they did not exclude the other.*

*Multiplicity which is not reduced to unity is confusion. Unity which does not depend on multiplicity is tyranny.'* (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, L604)

## **THE FOURFOLD OFFICE**

**PETER**  
*(Pastoral Care)*

**PAUL**  
*(Adaptation)*

**JAMES**  
*(Tradition)*

**JOHN**  
*(Love)*

The structuring of the Marian Church emerges later, during Jesus' ministry when he appoints Peter and the Twelve to apostolic authority in his name, and is completed when the Risen Christ calls Paul to apostolic service. Within the complex, multi-dimensional network of principles in the church, Balthasar identifies a smaller network which bear upon the exercise of authority, what he calls 'the Apostolic Foursome' represented by Peter, John, James and Paul, the 'four who dominate the field of force of the developing Church' (309). Each principle in the Foursome represents a clearly defined mission within the Church, necessarily involved with each other. Here there is a particular interaction among the principles which shapes how the Petrine/collegial mission is to be conducted. Petrine authority, of course, is to be exercised in the collegial authority invested in the Twelve ('a symbolic, solemn founding of the New Israel' (139)): there has to be a 'breathing together' (*conspiratio*) if Petrine authority is to function with a respect for collegiality and if collegial authority is to have a concrete centre of unity.

Petrine authority is called upon to respect the demands of other principles: these may be thought of as 'checks' on unrestrained Petrine power, but the Petrine ministry sets a framework within which each principle can function most effectively. Each principle, like each human being, has its own particular way of going wrong, the Johannine, Jamesian and Pauline, no less than the Petrine. (Only the Marian gets it right.) Separated from the others, each principle in the Fourfold Office can become distorted: Johannine love can weaken to a 'universal humanitarian benevolence'; Pauline flexibility can become a fashionable assimilation to cultural mores; the tradition of James can give rise to an 'anxiously integralist, reactionary clinging to obsolete forms' and the distortions to which the Petrine ministry is subject need 'no further mention here' (328-9). The whole point of Balthasar's account is that these *equal but differentiated* foundational principles must affect one another if there is to be genuine Catholicity. (Remember Congar's definition of Catholicity as 'the dynamic universality of the principles which yield her unity'.)

A brief outline of the features of each principle:

- Peter exercises the *pastoral office*. The scandal of Peter is that he is given 'singular participation in Jesus' authority' which obliges him to 'participate especially in Jesus' spirit of service and his readiness to suffer' (142). A sinful man, he is to hold the keys of the kingdom and feed the sheep and lambs of Jesus the Good Shepherd. In his weakness he is appointed as the Rock/Shepherd who is to exemplify Christ's own position as the cornerstone (Eph 2.20) and the true shepherd (Jn 10.11). His denial of Christ places him closest to Judas in his betrayal, yet he is called to strengthen the faith of his brethren and be the unifying principle within the Church. The authority given to Peter is 'social and universal, affecting the entire flock' (62).
- John, the Beloved Disciple, exercises the *office of love*, the dimension of reciprocal love between Christ and his Church, an office exercised by the

saints of the Church who always ‘represent the link between the Marian and the Petrine Church’ (225). Balthasar sees Johannine love as fulfilling a mediating role, first of all, between Christ and Peter’s pastoral office: when Peter is asked by Christ, ‘Do you love me?’ he is asked to share in Johannine love as a condition of his exercising the pastoral ministry (‘Feed my sheep’). Peter is reminded by Christ that Johannine love will remain (in the Church) until Christ returns in glory: ‘In the unfathomable mystery of Jesus’ good pleasure, John retains his own mission, distinct from that of Peter’. John 21 contains ‘a subtly composed symbolic doctrine of the Church in which the task of “office” (Peter) and the task of “love” (John) become...intertwined’ (142). John’s second mediating role, between the (lay) Marian and the (institutional) Petrine Church is signalled by his faithful discipleship at the foot of the Cross when, Peter having denied Christ, John becomes the son and guardian of *Maria-Ecclesia*. ‘The truly Johannine Church is... the one that stands under the Cross in place of Peter and on his behalf receives the Marian Church’ (225).

- James, the brother of the Lord, represents the dimension of *tradition and law* (Torah). The leader of the Jewish-Christian Jerusalem community (the *ecclesia ex circumcissione*) -- taking Peter’s place after he leaves Jerusalem (Acts 12.17) -- he represents continuity between the Old and New Covenants and the dimension of Torah-observance that Jesus came to perfect. James mediated between Jews and Gentiles at the first Council of Jerusalem, reconciling conservative Jewish Christians to the presence in the Church of ‘those not under the law’ (1 Cor 2.20-1). He puts forward nothing less than ‘the perfect law of liberty’ (James 1.25). The Jewish writer Franz Rosenzweig in the early part of this century suggested that God’s ‘Star of Redemption’ had Judaism at its core from which the rays of Christianity spread to the Gentile world; Rosenzweig argued that Christianity had to stay close to Jewish faith and observance or it would get lost in the gnosticisms of the pagan world. By making the principle of tradition and law constitutive of the Church, Balthasar echoes Rosenzweig in making the tie to Jewish tradition a bulwark against cultural assimilation and compromise.
- Paul represents the dimension of *universalism and inculturation*. The apostle of the *ecclesia ex gentibus*, he represents the Church’s engagement with the cultures of the world, in which it is to find a home, becoming ‘all things to all people...for the sake of the Gospel’ (1 Cor 9.22-3). He also represents charismatic vocation—he is outside the structure of the Twelve, yet is given a vocation which the hierarchical Church must acknowledge as willed by Christ—and dynamic mission modelled on the ‘type’ of Christ (144). He also represents the dimension of the creation and development of local churches—his ‘anxiety for all the churches’ (2 Cor 11.28) and his ‘travail till Christ be formed’ in them (Gal 4.19) -- which are to find their place within the *Catholica*. He also symbolises the dimension of freedom in the Spirit: the dialectic between James and Paul (Rom 4.2-3 versus James 2.20-23) mirrors the dialectic in the Church between freedom from the Law and obedience to the Law until the return of Christ. He is, in short, the dimension of *apostolic energy* in the Church.

## V

*'Pope. God does not perform miracles in the ordinary conduct of his Church. It would be a strange miracle if infallibility resided in one man, but that it should be in the many seems so natural that God's work is hidden beneath nature, as in all his other works.'* (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, L726)

The Petrine office is thus set in an indispensable relation to these other principles: the concrete centre of unity in the *Catholica* requires a living relationship with the principles of love/holiness, tradition and adaptation. It is important that the Petrine dimension, located in the *collegium* of the Twelve, is the only one to find visible, institutional expression (the Papacy): there is no stable focus of holiness (how could there be?) and the principles of Jamesian tradition and Pauline adaptation have been in tension since the admission of Gentiles at Antioch, and continue to be so today.

The development of Liberation Theology in the 1970s and 1980s—best viewed, in my opinion, as a *prophetic spirituality* rather than as a 'theology'—is the most dramatic instance in recent years of the Pauline adaptation of Gospel principles to the demands of a particular situation, that of Third World poverty and injustice. There has been a traditionalist resistance to this development, but the role of Rome in handling the matter -- issuing two documents from the Congregation for the Faith, one deliberately critical and the other deliberately appreciative -- tends towards neither integralist condemnation nor naive approval. This Pauline development is filtering through all levels of the Church's life, including the social teaching of Pope John Paul II whose theological vocabulary shows that he has learned from the Liberationists.

Authority has a natural bias towards tradition and will always be cautious about the rate of change appropriate to a Church whose life is transcultural. The public perception is that the Papacy of John Paul II is characterised by a stronger bond between Peter and James (tradition) than between Peter and Paul (adaptation), largely because 'adaptation' is often interpreted as accommodation to the culture of the secularised West, and moral teaching hits the headlines more than theological teaching. There is truth in this, but it is not the whole story.

It is clear that Pope John Paul wants to shape a Church which is strong at its centre (strong in identity, core beliefs, boundary markers, faith-experience and practice), because only then can the Church have the inner strength to promote values on which the good of all depends. Authority *ad intra* in his papacy has been directed towards re-centring the Church in the post-Conciliar period and ensuring that potentially fissiparous cracks are repaired. *Ad extra*, in his relations with the non-Christian religions, the moral authority of the Papacy has been characterised by openness and a more imaginative theological vision than has been generally acknowledged: his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, the remarkable *Dialogue and Proclamation* published

by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and his speeches on Jewish-Christian relations are in advance of most of the rest of the Church. In these areas, he exemplifies a creative engagement -- genuinely Pauline, I think -- with the spectrum to be found in the contemporary religious Areopagus.

The principles in the Fourfold Office should be directed, Balthasar judges, towards what he calls 'the *eschatological centre of gravity* of the Gospel of Christ', a dense phrase whose meaning is difficult to discern. (329). I take it mean that the Fourfold Office must aim at giving the most complete form of witness to God's unsurpassable self-gift in Christ, and must settle for nothing less than this. In which case, it is the Johannine principle, the ideal of holiness and unitive love for Christ, towards which the interaction of the other three principles must be directed. (John, after all, is the point of contact between Marian holiness and Petrine authority.) The goal of the Fourfold Office is the holiness of the Church. Consequently, *the Petrine office is to be directed towards enabling the Church to embody Johannine love and holiness, and it must do this with an eye on what comes both from the Jamesian principle of tradition and from the Pauline principle of adaptation*. Sometimes the Fourfold Office discerns easily what teaching to give in order to foster love and holiness, but not always:

... there are cases where it is extremely difficult to weigh the reasons for and against, particularly when one tries to keep in mind the 'eschatological centre of gravity', not only because some current situation did not exist in the period of biblical revelation, which means that conclusions have to be drawn from the spirit of a unique historical past and applied to a very different present, but also because Christ's Church contains a wide spectrum of human possibilities or obstructions, at the same time contributing to and detracting from a perfect human response to the perfect grace of God in Christ... A decision that is justifiable for those whose love is alive might be impractical for the lukewarm... on the other hand, a decision made to suit these latter could seriously endanger the balance of the Church's eschatological response, the ideal of those who love (329).

This is precisely the situation of *Humanae Vitae*, he says, the most controversial instance of recent papal teaching, in which the Pope opted to point the Church's teaching towards the latter (Johannine) ideal and, consequently, to offer the more difficult teaching on marital sexuality. Balthasar presents the case of *Humanae Vitae* as a contemporary paradigm of the functioning of the Fourfold Office: 'though empowered and obliged to take the final, personal responsibility alone, the pope is directed to share in a dialogue with the other three partners of the "foursome"' (330-1). The problem, Balthasar says, has to do with the *form* of the teaching (an encyclical which bound the consciences of married Catholics) rather than its *content*: 'this resulted in a crisis for the more recent trend which had endeavoured to mask the exercise of authority' (330). Balthasar challenges neither the decision made by Pope Paul VI to issue the encyclical nor its (non-infallible) content, but he wonders whether another, less decisive response might not have been as effective:

It might have been sufficient to point to the ideal as a 'normative goal' to satisfy the objective, eschatological idea of the Christian concept of selfless and self-renouncing love, the personal ideal of the committed, while at the same time both stimulating and reassuring those who were either too unable or too perplexed to follow this course. For who does not see the devastation created in the sexual area by the separation of pleasure from the risk of self-giving, as well as the tremendous weight of sociological arguments on the other side? (330)

Yet what Balthasar outlines here as an alternative is what the encyclical set out to achieve. Using his own terms, one can say that while the Papal teaching points the Church towards the Johannine ideal and affirms the Church's tradition on contraception, it is no less coloured by a nuanced Pauline response to the presence of both 'strong' and 'weak' members of the community and a pastoral strategy for directing them toward unity (Rom 14; 1 Cor 8.4-9.14). Although public comment on the encyclical often ignores this aspect, both in the encyclical and in the subsequent statements of Episcopal Conferences, this Pauline principle of acknowledging different capacities and insights within the Church was a central part of the Petrine and episcopal presentation of the teaching. A long quotation from Balthasar is apposite here:

...Peter too must be continually learning: he must not think that he can carry out his office in isolation (which could easily tempt him to overvalue it). He too must take his bearings by the all-encompassing totality of the Church, which expresses itself concretely in the dynamic interplay of her major missions and in the laws inherent in her structure.... Revelation is entrusted to the whole Church, and all, under the leadership of Peter, are to preserve it, interpret it and produce a living exposition of it. And since the office of Peter is borne by fallible human beings, it needs everyone's watchful but loving cooperation so that the exercise of this office may be characterized by the degree of 'in-fallibility' that belongs to it. More precisely, this means that a pope can exercise his office fruitfully for all only if he is *recognized and loved* in a truly ecclesial way, even in the midst of *paraklesis* or dispute (315).

A quotation which bears meditation, not simply for what it says about the Papacy should behave, but also because it directs attention to the question of the appropriate response to Petrine authority. Like a tango, it takes more than one for authority to work well, but it only takes one to ruin it: either the one in authority or the one under authority.

## VI

I will end with some comments on Abbé Laberthonnière who, according to Balthasar, 'in his meditations on the form of ecclesial authority....came up with the most profound and prophetic insights' on the exercise of authority and the response to authority (262). Laberthonnière (1860-1932), whose works were put on the Index in the post-Modernist purge, was a sharp-tongued critic of Roman authorities, whom he accused of promoting a 'lord-

servant' relationship in the Church incompatible with the Christian concept of a self-giving God:

You [Romans] always imagine that God created men to rule over them and to assert his rights as sovereign. You see God as a kind of potentate, and then you pass yourselves off as being delegated by him to implement his power and reign. Thus you stand the Gospel on its head. (263)

A strong attack, of course, in the best tradition of protest against Roman domineering. For Laberthonnière, the Church can be only “a unity through *communio*” of free persons who, by their freely willed love, are moved to build a unified Church’ (262). Christian authority, he says, can never instruct ‘from outside’, nor can the truth be imposed; nor should the Christian submit himself to be led and instructed purely passively (263). He denounces those in authority who withdraw into ‘proud self-sufficiency’ and boast that it ‘only has to wait for others to come’ to them, for then the conduct of authority in the Church splits into, on the one hand, ‘authoritarianism and the lust for power’, and on the other, into a servility filled with ‘ambitious grovelling’.

He is clear that the solution to the exercise of authority in the Church cannot be one-sided. There is simply no point in constantly demanding that those in authority behave better, if those under authority do not change at the same time: the responsibility for making Church authority authentically Christian is shared by all. Laberthonnière asks two penetrating questions, and then asks a third as a way of clarifying the point of the second question:

In what spirit and in what manner should leadership and instruction be given, to be truly human and Christian? And, in turn, how should a person who is progressing in faith prepare himself to receive guidance and instruction?... How should people like us [who have not been given authority] act, so that, spiritually deepened by the acceptance of authority, we can contribute to the spiritual deepening of authority itself?” (262)

I cannot prescribe what the answers to Laberthonnière’s questions should be, since they bear upon each Catholic’s core of spiritual responsibility: Levinas’ aphorism, ‘responsibility cannot be preached, only borne’, is exactly right here. But some comments are required: Laberthonnière’s third question looks for a dimension of spiritual deepening in the *acceptance* of authority which will bring about an analogous deepening in the *exercise* of authority, a relationship of reciprocity and mutuality in which, by my acceptance of authority, the conditions are created for authority in the Church to be exercised in a fruitful way. I have a spiritual responsibility in this regard which comes from my sense that salvation is mediated to me through this *mysterium*, that in its direction and guidance I encounter a claim on my obedience grounded in Christ’s authority and my obedience to him. <sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Can we ignore the spirituality of obedience developed particularly in the religious orders which speak about an ‘obedience of will and intellect’ in response to the exercise of authority? The theme is obviously an expression of a particular charism, but it elucidates something fundamental in Christian life: a ‘de-centring’ of the self in faithful membership of the Body of Christ. How much of the resistance to authority comes from a view of the ‘autonomous self’, which regards obligations to authority and claims on obedience as intrusive impositions which must be discarded for the self to be free?

aspect is central to how we are to live together, hierarchy and people, with a shared but differentiated responsibility to one another and to Christ. (Möhlner's earlier comment on Protestantism and papism sharing a common source in a self-regarding 'egoism' is to the point here.) In the Church, I have obligations to help those in authority to promote the Church's holiness which I must acknowledge if my membership of this body makes any sense and if my identity as a Catholic Christian is to be spiritually and ethically mature.

For Balthasar, Laberthonnière's last question 'is still with the Church', and it is 'the question of mutuality, of *communio*' (265) It points, he says, towards how we should *help* one another: this simple category needs to come to the fore, if authority is not to be prompted to respond in 'pre-conciliar ways' in the contemporary Church. It points, too, towards the quality of *conversation* fostered in the Church, for which everyone has responsibility. Where there is deafness, people shout. Balthasar's insistence that a pope can exercise his office fruitfully only if he is '*recognized and loved* in a truly ecclesial way, even in the midst of dispute' (315) points to the responsibility of those under authority to make it possible for those in authority to exercise it properly.

In Laberthonnière's opinion, the mutuality which exists among persons in the Church means that

*'Obeying has the same dignity as commanding; the existence of both is justified only if they lead to free brotherly union of minds and souls in love and truth in the bosom of the heavenly Father'* (264; emphasis added).

This seems to me exactly right and evangelical in its insight: it not a question of where 'power' lies in the Church, but of the elimination of the category of power from the attitudes of all in the Church. It will be eliminated by neither by abrogating the claims of the Petrine Office, nor by transferring it democratically to synodical assemblies, although such bodies may well have a useful part to play in the governance of the Church. That obedience has the same dignity as commanding is also the single point which disturbs any possible parallel we may want to draw between the Church and secular organisations: there are, after all, no 'greater' persons and 'lesser' persons in the Church since the only dignity which lasts into eternity is holiness.

If obeying is no less than commanding, then the dignity of the Christian who responds maturely to authority is far from servility, but is a responsibility freely undertaken for the good of all, as an expression of devotion to Christ. If commanding is no greater than obeying, it will be humble in its manner. When Laberthonnière speaks of 'a "unity through *communio*" of free persons who, by their freely willed love, are moved to build a unified Church', he is pointing to this spiritual responsibility on the part of all, coming from the core of their faith in Christ. There is, after all, a limit to the extent to which organisational analysis and change can improve the quality of the Church's life: a church of committees pleases only religious journalists.

Although Balthasar would distance himself from the anti-Roman stance adopted by Laberthonnière in his long confrontation with harsh authority, it seems to me he has immense sympathy for the tone of what Laberthonnière is calling for. Laberthonnière's statements about the spiritual maturity which should be sought both by those who exercise authority and those who respond

to it are exact and profound: we help one another, not by creating an adolescent 'Church of Siblings' from which authority is banished or marginalised, but by fostering an attentive and humble maturity both in the exercise of authority and in our response to it.

Balthasar's constellation of ecclesial principles and the features of the Fourfold Office describes the Church in a way which enables Laberthonnière's questions to be asked properly and appropriate answers sought. If Balthasar is right that the centre of the Church is not Petrine but Marian, then the obedience of faith flowing from Marian experience flows into a mature spiritual response to the authority of Peter and the *collegium*. A sense that the core of the Church is *lay holiness* which precedes hierarchical structuring is a corrective to an exaggerated estimate of Papal authority and will condition how the Papacy conducts itself in the Church. If Petrine authority is to avoid destructive patterns of authoritarian isolation, it must acknowledge other, equally valid dimensions of the Church and serve them and listen to them with respect. At the same time, Balthasar's insistence that Petrine authority is an indispensable dimension of the Church, whose role is neither to be dissolved nor its claims softened, firmly sets Papal authority within the essential structure of the Church and requires courteous acknowledgement from the members of the Church. His account of the Fourfold Office is, I think, a helpful configuration of the factors which come into play in the proper exercise of authority in the Church. At the beginning of this paper, I said that Balthasar 'presses the community of the Church to examine the bias in its nature against its central institutional focus'; he also, I think, provides the Church with an account of its identity within which authority can be properly set, judged, evaluated and valued.