

On the papacy.

There is too much wriggling about the New Testament. That is, a lazy approach says that the Gospel texts about Peter do not go back to Jesus, so we can ignore them. If true, what else can we ignore, and indeed is there anything left? The more prudent approach is that they, like all scripture, should be taken seriously. Admitted, the church existed and grew before a word of the New Testament writings was written, and for several centuries the individual churches were having to judge, on the basis of the faith they had received, whether a particular book was true to that faith and had apparent apostolic authority such that it could be read in church. Tradition had to judge purported scripture before scripture could become authoritative. But the reversal happened, and scripture should now be received as authoritative.

The Petrine texts suggest that in some sense Peter is chief of the Twelve and so becomes the natural leader; that he is given authority both to teach and to judge. Essentially, the issues are doctrine and discipline, and no organisation can survive without them. The gospel promise is that God will support the church in this. It is all the more important as Jesus never wrote a word that we are aware of; everything that mattered to him was delivered in oral teaching and so could only be preserved by the recipients. The authority given to Peter is however also extended to a wider group of disciples, and arguably becomes part of the eventual endowment of bishops.

There are reasonable grounds for asserting that both Peter and Paul ministered in and were martyred in Rome. The idea that this fact gave the Roman church a particular claim to know what Christianity was and to advise others is very ancient. It is already found in Clement of Rome (variously dated between 70 and 95, so quite possibly as early as some New Testament writings). The giving of advice is less than exercising such authority as belonged to Peter and Paul, of course.

In this context, it is certain that Rome had in Clement's time copies of some at least of Paul's epistles, and also of Hebrews. We know more of the reception of the New Testament writings in Rome during the first three centuries than elsewhere (which is little enough).

The idea of a succession of teachers (which depends on the younger having learned from his predecessor) is also ancient. (Irenaeus) The stability of a church in the faith is bound up with the succession of its teachers (who quite early became bishops). This was an effective argument against various heretics who could not demonstrate such a succession in the faith. Of course there were other churches of ancient foundation (and both Peter and Paul had ministered in Antioch), but the succession in Rome was documented and Rome was accessible. The succession of teachers of course gives weight to Paul as well as Peter. (Note that a succession of teachers is not quite the same as "apostolic succession", but the practical consequences overlap.)

From time to time during the persecutions we know that Rome did advise on the faith and (less frequently) pass judgement on individuals. This is not to say that all other churches had frequent recourse to it or always accepted such advice as was given (Cyprian).

Let it be noted, "Pope" is simply vulgar Greek for "father" and was anciently applied to the bishop of Alexandria (indeed still is among the Copts) just as readily, and informally, as to the bishop of Rome. The Papacy is not even in Roman theology a distinct form of the ordained ministry.

The nightmare of the "conversion" of Constantine was that there was a very grave risk that the faith would be whatever suited the emperor (or in our later case Henry VIII, and now Parliament). It is the strange achievement of the church of Rome, and within it of the papacy, to have preserved the recognition that the Christian faith was what had been received, not what the sovereign chose to impose. This achievement has held good until quite recent times. It is the strongest case for some God-endorsed doctrinal role persisting in the papacy, if it were reformable to limit itself to this.

The ecumenical councils should be mentioned. They are better termed "imperial" and are almost entirely Eastern, as the West generally did not attend and the Pope only sent delegates. The conciliar period is not a happy period for the faith, though a small minority of the many councils called by the emperors has been accepted by the Church. We do not anticipate any new ecumenical councils, even if we doubt that they can only be called by secular authority. But see Article 21.

Use of the Petrine texts to support Roman claims could not develop until the general acceptance of the Gospels as authoritative, and is not common in the early centuries. Indeed, it follows a particularly bloody papal election. It is not obvious from scripture that Peter's endowment should be perpetuated in his successors, or why in Rome rather than Antioch or in all the bishops.

Great as is the achievement of Rome in maintaining the long-standing understanding of the faith against various secular rulers, it should be realised that the increasing documentation of the faith and the eventual acceptance of the New Testament writings meant that stability in essentials could be maintained without fresh recourse to Rome. Indeed, the periods of multiple popes were such that at times Rome (or Avignon!) was not a source of stability.

The belief that Rome was the essential place for "keeping the deposit" unfortunately led to the temptation to add to the deposit. Whether or not the immaculate conception or the corporeal assumption (or for that matter papal infallibility itself) are true, they are neither part of the original deposit nor safe deductions from it, unlike Christ the King. Austin Farrer wrote of "an infallible fact-factory going full blast". That is unfair, for there are very few instances of new doctrines being promulgated on the basis of "facts" not previously known as such, but there should be none.

So much for the doctrinal role. Until the stabilisation of the New Testament and the faith, it was important. Even after that, God has used the papacy for protective purposes.

Now the Petrine texts speak also of binding and loosing, which is basically that if Peter decides a case, God will endorse his verdict. Austin Farrer quite rightly points out that if there is to be a christian body, then it must have rules and their enforcement, and it should not surprise that Jesus promises that God endorses this process. This is a permanent need; eventually, much of the need for rules issued in canon law, and much of the judgement in bishops acting individually or in provincial synods.

But is there a particular and overriding authority in Peter's successors at Rome (and not at Antioch, and without reference to Paul)? It is noteworthy that whereas Paul issues binding instructions to the Corinthians, Clement does not believe himself (whatever position he held at Rome) to have that authority and can only urge them to a course of action. The Pope had to rule on the date of Easter, for Rome was more affected than other churches by visitors with different practices. When the Pope declared adultery (inter alia) to be a forgivable sin, Tertullian (not to mention Hippolytus) regarded this as an abuse of office, as if the Bishop of Rome were a pagan Pontifex Maximus. For even a local ruling in such a matter has implications for the rest of the churches. In this case the Pope was probably right (1 John might be cited against this), and yet this ruling was the beginning of legitimized laxity. When another Pope declared that Athanasius was orthodox and admitted him to communion, we probably think he judged well. We might be more unsure when he took the same decision about Marcellus of Ancyra! In both these cases, he had no choice but to take a decision one way or the other so far as his own church of Rome, to which they had fled, was concerned; there were no inherent wider implications in this case as the other churches simply did not have the problem of these particular refugees. Notice that a disciplinary ruling has doctrinal implications!

It becomes very different as Rome makes itself out to be the universal court of appeal; and much more so when the Pope claims universal immediate jurisdiction, so that even in the most trivial case the initial verdict of the individual bishop, or the bishops of a province, can be forestalled.

It is part of this claim that the Pope now chooses bishops (in almost all cases). This is quite a recent development. It is totally unlike the practice of the early church, in which the new bishop was elected by the faithful and consecrated (unless completely unsuitable) by neighbouring bishops.

We might add that the liturgical changes falsely attributed to Vatican 2 (they began much earlier and were mostly not mandated by the actual decisions of that council) rest on papal authority. Yes, discipline means there is a regulatory role in the church. But the virtual suppression of the ancient Roman liturgy seems to be a remarkable extension of such authority into a freedom of initiative.

This centralized system, extending from the unavoidable issues of discipline into regulatory initiative and overriding authority has no warrant in scripture or early practice.

For our local position, we do well to reflect on the 39 Articles. I have already written about them elsewhere, so this is not a full treatment even of the relevant articles. Our local canons give them authority, but the wider Continuing movement is less committed to the Articles than to the Affirmation of St. Louis. The post-Canterbury Anglican movement is on the whole committed to the Articles (but some Anglican bodies have revised them). It should be noted that “Rome” and “the papacy” are not inherently identical, but have long been treated as such.

“The Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith”. (19) This purports to be a statement of historical fact and can be vindicated as such. Therefore, on the evidence, Rome is not automatically infallible as to doctrine and the promises to Peter cannot mean that it is. Granted that the Vatican 1 assertion of papal infallibility is quite limited, the procedures at that council were scandalous; we do not accept its validity even for Roman Catholics, much less for the wider Christian body. It was not a general council. Consequently, we do not accept “infallible” decisions unless they can be otherwise validated.

God protects his church from fatal error in the long run; in that sense the faith of Peter is a rock. We still need protection from secular authority imposing its view of religion, but Rome is not currently a reliable reference point for doctrine, though the “Catechism” is largely (not completely) sound. If Rome is to be taken seriously at some time, a return to stability in the ancient truths is essential.

“The Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this realm of England”. (37) This is now false on the facts, because secular law upholds his jurisdiction over his adherents (he appoints their bishops). We may suspect that the original implication of the Article was that he ought to have none, even as a final court of appeal. Law and justice is a necessity in any body, and not least in the church, as already said. In secular law, it is considered a matter of natural justice that within the rules of any organisation there should be one appeal available. But all the requirements of justice in the church can be achieved on a more local scale than by appeals to Rome. “Can be” does not imply “are”, but Rome is hardly trustworthy as a final court of appeal anyway. And Rome claims too much for itself. It did not anciently have control over the liturgy outside its own area, and should not assume it. It did not anciently appoint bishops.

Continuing Anglicans perforce accept that the repudiation of Rome and later remodelling of the Church of England were legitimate at the time. That is not the same as entirely wisely done. We do not accept that there was a perfect reformation in 1559 or shortly afterwards to which we should conform. Anglicanism has been a learning experience, and much of that learning has involved correction of the original reformation. By about four hundred years after the English reformation, the Church of England was a better Christian body than it had been. More recently, it became worse. Practical Anglican isolation is bad; we ought as far as possible to learn from and conform to the wisdom of the wider Catholic church. This does not deny that all Christian bodies are imperfect. We do believe that Anglicanism was (and can be continued as) part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and that we too can be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Doctrine and discipline there must be. At times, Rome and the papacy has been a significant help. At times, an impediment. There is far too long a gap between the Petrine texts and their use to support papal claims for even the late patristic papacy to be credible as having God's automatic authority. Much less the medieval and renaissance papacy, the Vatican 1 papacy, and still less the new ultramontaniam.

The patristic ecclesiology was that each local church (under its own bishop) ought to work with all other churches (but in practice would seldom need to interact with most of them). There would only be one church in each city, so “altar against altar” would not happen. There are still parts of the world where this is realistic, but it depends upon a model of small towns with associated countryside which is now uncommon. Even the Church of England does not manage to make a purely geographical model of parishes work and faces a risk of schism. We do not have much idea what a united church, inevitably with geographical overlaps, would look like.