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Editorial

OF the contemporary theologians of the Roman Catholic Church none has achieved a greater reputation in the Protestant world than Hans Küng, the young professor in the faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Tübingen. He, more than any other, has come to be regarded as the popular spokesman for the Papal Church in its new ecumenical outreach. His evident good humour, the charity of his spirit, his willingness to admit the justness of so much that the Reformers of the sixteenth century contended for, and his appeal for drastic self-criticism on the part of his own church have caught the imagination. His latest book, *Structures of the Church* (Burns & Oates, 358 pp., 42s.) is more weighty and important, and less popular in its presentation, than those that have preceded it. Indeed, it may be described as a more strictly academic substantiation of what he has been saying hitherto. Accordingly, it merits very careful attention, dealing as it does with such basic issues in the dispute between Papal and Reformed Christianity as the place and power of the laity, apostolic succession, the supremacy of the Petrine office, the authority of popes and councils, and the question of papal infallibility. The aim of the book is defined as "to provide a description of certain essential characteristics of the Catholic Church", and "to shed light on the structure, on the living configuration of the Church in order to re-discover the central elements and connections within her organization".

Dr. Küng propounds a distinction between an ecumenical council by divine convocation and an ecumenical council by human convocation. The former is "the universal Church . . . the mysterious assembly of those who believe in Christ . . . the great concilium of the faithful, convoked in the Spirit of God Himself through Christ". The latter is a representation of the former summoned by men, though ostensibly with the aid of God—in other words, what is commonly understood by the term ecumenical council in the history of the Church. Inasmuch as in either case the entity is a convocation of men, Dr. Küng rightly concludes that "we always deal with councils in which the human, the all-too-human, and sinful element cannot be excluded"; and he adds that "everything in the Church that involves failure and weariness, mediocrity and malice, unintentional and intentional distortion can also be found at a council by human convocation". While it is true that the holiness of the universal "council" of believers can be manifested, therefore, only by virtue of the sanctifying Spirit who is at work in the Church, we must firmly reject the argument that the ecumenical authority of general councils derives from the promise of Christ (as Dr. Küng applies it) that the Spirit "will remain for ever in the Church (Jn. 14: 16f.), teaching her and reminding her of all that Jesus has said (Jn. 14: 26), testifying to a new truth not on His own authority but in witness to the truth of Christ, and thus lead us to all truth (Jn. 16: 13f.)"; for this promise applied specifically to the apostles, whom Christ had personally instructed, and to no one else. Hence the authority of the apostolic teaching of the New Testament as *canonical* and the sole norm by which the declarations of men and

of councils must be judged. The misapplication of this Johannine passage is all too prevalent today and leads to the unfortunate casuistry which blandly affirms that a majority decision of an ecclesiastical assembly or convocation *ipso facto* reflects the mind and will of the Holy Spirit and is binding on the consciences of all. No decision which is out of line with the apostolic doctrine of the New Testament, no matter how impressive the council that has passed it, is either authentic or binding in the Church. The admonitions of Articles XX and XXI to the effect that the ordering of anything contrary to God's Word written has neither strength nor authority are as necessary today as they have ever been, and as much in Protestant as in Papal circles.

The cleavage of councils into majorities and minorities presents a real problem, as Dr. Küng perceives. Yet even unanimity, should it be achieved, is not in itself a guarantee of authenticity. In principle, however, and assuming the guidance of the Holy Spirit, conciliar decisions should be unanimous. As Dr. Küng observes, "it is not in the large 'fraction' that the Holy Spirit of unity manifests His presence but in the concord of all". But as mathematical unanimity is virtually unobtainable, Dr. Küng resorts to the device of *moral* unanimity, which only has the effect of landing us back in the realm of the authority of the majority decision. Thus we find him quoting with approval the argument of Yves Congar that "voting at a council is only a means for achieving unanimity; by means of a majority the true mind and directive of the Church as such is determined so that perhaps those few who had not yet perceived it could now—after it had been interpreted and determined—recognize it as a law binding upon all". This may be generally true, but it is not necessarily always so. The point is that what is binding is not "the mind of the Church" as represented by the majority vote but the apostolic teaching of Scripture, and if this is reflected in the vote of the minority who are defeated then the minority is right and the majority is wrong. Indeed, in that case it is the minority and not the majority which represents the mind of the true Church of Christ.

It would seem that Dr. Küng finds himself in something of a dilemma, torn between the necessity of defending the dogmatic *status quo* as more or less rigidly defined by his church and the desire to apply the incomparably more dynamic conception of Scripture and the Holy Spirit which is characteristic of the teaching of the Reformers. He speaks, for example, with the authentic voice of the Reformation when he asserts, with admirable clarity, that "the holy Church is credibly represented when a council carries out the will of the heavenly Father, when it hearkens to a Jesus Christ who speaks to the Church through Holy Scripture, when it is open to the Holy Scripture, when it is open to the Holy Spirit which bloweth where it listeth, within or without any institution". With this as the genuine basis of encounter and negotiation, the gulf between Rome and Reform would no longer be unbridgeable! All we would ask of our friends in the Roman Catholic Church is that courageously and consistently they should apply this cardinal principle to their own system, while at the same time we apply it to ours. The unsatisfactory aspects of Dr. Küng's case are due entirely to a failure to make this application at all points of his

argument. Thus the distinction he makes between Scripture and tradition as between *norma normans* and *norma normata* is in theory unexceptionable; but we would ask him to see whether he (together with his fellow-churchmen) has not uncritically accepted more than one tradition as *norma normata* because a venerable longevity or an official promulgation has invested it with an aura of inviolability, when in fact it is repugnant to the *norma normans* of Scripture and thereby usurps to itself the illegitimate dignity of a *norma normans*.

The biblical principle of the universal priesthood of all believers, which was discovered and announced anew by Luther, is readily embraced by Dr. Küng. This principle, he agrees, is the foundation which makes it possible and right for the laity to participate in the proceedings of ecumenical councils. It is not sufficient, as has so often been the case in the past, for the lay representation to be restricted to the presence of emperors or noblemen, who have been welcome because of their high rank rather than their worth as Christians. Yet Dr. Küng judges that "conciliar history provides impressive evidence of a manifold participation of the laity at such gatherings". And with exemplary objectivity he adds: "It is precisely the model prescribed in the book of Acts which reveals how erroneous it would be to make the First Vatican Council, clearly the furthest removed from this model, into an ideal image of a council developed to the peak of perfection. This example clearly shows how oversimplified and basically wrong it would be to understand historical development in the Church as a steady forward movement to an ideal". In contrast to Vatican I, from which lay persons were banned, Dr. Küng insists that "no strictly theological and dogmatic reasons can be invoked to exclude *a priori* the participation of the laity in ecumenical councils".

We do not for a moment doubt the sincerity of Dr. Küng's approval of the principle of the supreme authority of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and worship which was so emphatically enunciated by the Reformers. Thus, in coming to the important question of the apostolicity of the Church, he urges on all, whatever their ecclesiastical allegiance, "the obligation constantly to realize anew that which is the crucial factor, if one desires the designation 'apostolic': namely, *objective harmony with the apostolic message*". The reason why "the attestation of the apostles occupies a unique, lasting—and unrepeatable—normative position within the Church and *vis-à-vis* the Church" is that "it is only in the testimony of the apostles that we perceive the glorified Lord". But this now leads to the vital question: "Does the succession in the apostolic spirit, in the apostolic faith and confession suffice?" Is there not something else that needs to be added, namely, succession in the apostolic *office*? To this (latter) question the Reformers responded with a resounding No, though neither Luther nor Calvin was in principle opposed to bishops, and of course in England the episcopal form of church government was never interrupted. Over and over again the Reformers insisted that the true apostolic succession is succession in the doctrine of the apostles, and suggested that the pope's claim to be the successor of St. Peter could be substantiated not by any amount of pedigree by tactual transmission but only by manifest conformity of his life and teaching to

those of the apostle he professed to succeed.

Dr. Küng, however, contends that episcopal succession in the apostolic office is an integral structure of the Church. But, it must be asked, what remains of the apostolic office if the bishops have departed from the apostolic teaching and practice? "The decade-long, indeed century-long, predominantly unapostolic behaviour of the bishops was a major cause of the Lutheran reformation", acknowledges Dr. Küng. "The continuous unapostolic attitude of the bishops, even after the outbreak of the Lutheran reformation, was responsible for the fact that the Reformation did not end to the advantage of the apostolic office (as Luther's intentions had been in principle)." Precisely: and so Luther and the other Reformers set out to restore, not to break away from, the apostolicity of the Church which had been lost to sight under the bishops; and they did so in terms of apostolic doctrine and conduct rather than of office, since, apart from the insecurity of the origins of this quasi-mechanical concept of succession in office, history had shown only too plainly that it guaranteed nothing. The important concession is made (important because, though of little moment to the non-Catholic, in revealing a new spirit of charity on the part of Papal theology at the same time it cuts through the root of the whole hypothesis of succession in office) that the Catholic does not in fact "think that episcopal succession in office is the only means of preserving the Church in the succession of the apostolic faith, of which the Spirit of God makes use". But if, as Dr. Küng affirms, apostolic succession "is not an arbitrary human invention but a work of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ who sovereignly rules in the Church", and "does not contradict the Word, but stands in the service of the Word", what happens to the doctrine of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit when that succession ceases (as it is admitted has happened) to stand in the service of the Word?

Again, it must be asked why, if it is true, as Dr. Küng boldly declares in words which would have delighted the heart of Luther or Calvin or Cranmer, that "the testing standard is not the *status quo* (itself to be tested) of the Church, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ", it "goes without saying" that for Catholics a denial of the decrees of the Council of Trent is "definitely out of the question". This is a prime example of *status quo* mentality, especially when it is remembered that the Council of Trent anathematized the distinctive doctrines of the Gospel which the Reformers, enlightened by Scripture, found themselves compelled to formulate in the face of the prevailing unapostolicity of the "succession" in their day. Dr. Küng does not even begin to solve the dilemma in which he is involved by assuring us that "no definition is exhaustive" and that even conciliar decrees can be "interpreted, expanded, and perfected".

Since the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church has entrenched itself much more deeply as a *status quo* institution, in particular by its promulgation of the extra-biblical dogmas of the infallibility of the pope and the immaculate conception and assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which are now absolutely binding on all the faithful on pain of eternal damnation. A more serious departure from the biblical principle which Dr. Küng professes to honour it would be difficult

to imagine. The possibility, not to say actuality, of such dogmatic tyranny is bound up with a rigid theory of the Petrine office as an essential structure of the Church. If it is true, as "the Catholic understanding of the faith" maintains, that Christ founded the Church on the rock of the Petrine office, then of course it follows that this office must be essential to the structure of the Church. The primacy of the pope, as holder of the Petrine office, was reaffirmed at the first Vatican Council as a "doctrine of Catholic truth", from which no one could deviate "without losing his faith and his salvation". Dr. Küng seeks to reassure his Protestant readers by explaining that there are limits to the absoluteness of papal authority, such as the co-operating and in some respects counterbalancing powers of the episcopate and of general councils; indeed, that, according to theological opinion, insanity, heresy, or schism would be proper grounds for the actual deposition of a pope. He points out, accordingly, that "the principle *Prima sedes a nemine iudicatur* has in fact its internal limits".

There are other limits or restraints which should belong to the basic conception of the nature and function of the Petrine office. In particular, it is important that the Bishop of Rome should ever be mindful that his position is one of ministry (service) not lordship. "There is only one Lord, Christ," admonishes Dr. Küng; "all the others are brothers. Even the pope is not the Lord of the Church but her servant, the servant of all. He cannot be pope unless he is first of all and ever anew again, with all others, a humble, believing Christian man." And then, of course, underlying all else is the limitation inherent in the fact that the pope, like the rest of us, is a mortal, fallible man. No sensible Roman Catholic theologian wishes to deny that this is so. How is this fact to be reconciled with the dogma of papal infallibility which was irreformably defined by pope and council at Vatican I nearly one hundred years ago? It is no solution to the problem for Dr. Küng to assure us that there are limits also to the infallibility of the pope: that absolute infallibility belongs to God alone and is not ascribed to the pope; that the infallibility of the pope is limited to the pastoral ministry of the whole Church; and that when the pope speaks as a private person or even when he speaks simply as the pope he is not infallible. "Rather he is infallible *only* when, as the universal teacher and supreme judge of the Church, he purposes to define, in the strictest sense and with the claim of his whole authority, a final doctrinal decision in matters of faith and morals for the whole Church." All this is already well known.

How is it credible that a sinful, fallible man may on certain occasions make absolutely infallible and irreformable pronouncements which bind the consciences of the faithful for evermore? The infallibility of which St. John speaks, as we have observed, was limited to the apostles and is enshrined for all time in the canon of the New Testament. Moreover, there is no shred of justification, either in the New Testament or in the early Church, for the distinction between Peter (or his supposed successors) speaking fallibly as a private person and speaking infallibly *ex cathedra*. The history of the popes does not encourage a belief in their infallibility, even within the limits defined. Most disturbing of all in this respect is the concrete evidence of the dogmas which have

been infallibly decreed *ex cathedra* and imposed on the faithful in modern times. The Marian dogmas (not to mention the mariolatry associated with them) are by themselves proof sufficient to anyone who is prepared to take the teaching of the New Testament seriously that the infallibility of the pope is a delusion and a blasphemy. In the light both of Scripture and of history, Dr. Küng's declaration that "in *ex cathedra* decisions the pope not only does not err in fact, but in principle cannot err" is entirely incredible and intolerable.

We do not impugn the seriousness or the sincerity of Dr. Küng. Indeed we admire his courage and his charity and believe that at heart he is not far from the Reformed faith. But we do charge him with inconsistency in terms of the principles which he has himself laid down, namely, the authority of Scripture as the *norma normans* in the Church and of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to which Scripture bears witness, as the testing standard, and the right of conscience to be bound only to the Word of God. With respect to conscience he plainly states that "even the teaching authority of the Catholic Church does not eliminate the freedom of Christian conscience", and that "subjective conscience possesses a genuine primacy over any objective norm". Conscience, he says, "is bound to the Word of God who sees into the heart. Hence one must remain true to conscience, no matter how strong the external pressure applied by the Church may be".

This we applaud. Yet we are bound sadly to conclude that in the end Dr. Küng's concern for the *structures* of the Church has been allowed to take priority over those evangelical principles to which he also wishes to be true and which are the very heart-beat of Christianity. Freedom of conscience and the binding of conscience by authoritarian *ex cathedra* papal definitions are two things which cannot be reconciled with each other, unless the decrees of the pope are manifestly in harmony with the apostolic teaching of the New Testament—in which case there would be no need for *ex cathedra* pontifications. The dogmas which have been imposed *ex cathedra* in modern times (1854, 1870, 1950) have in each case been conscientiously opposed by important theological and episcopal voices prior to their promulgation; yet these voices have in turn been effectively silenced by the authoritarian denunciation that failure to submit means *ipso facto* damnation. This, unfortunately, is not a matter of moral unanimity but of immoral suppression of conscience. It is murder of conscience. Today there are indications that there are many Roman Catholics, priests as well as laity, who are deeply disturbed about this situation. The widespread desire to reinterpret the irreformable decrees and anathemas of the Papal Church with the intention of making them assimilable for their "separated brethren"—though in the nature of the case it can only be a vain exercise—is itself evidence of this. With equal charity and sincerity we invite Dr. Küng to train the searchlight of the New Testament Gospel, which he admits is the testing standard of the Church, on the *status quo* of Roman Catholicism. At the same time we, who are painfully aware of the sickness of our own church, wish to submit ourselves afresh to the searching examination and judgment of the light of God's Word. But how much better if we could agree to do this *together* before God!

P.E.H.