

*'That they all may
be one'*



THE SICKLE OF AUTHORITY

to each his patch - Gregory and Augustine

Authority is always a threat when somebody else is exercising it. Authority is also often abused, yet it is necessary. In the Church the need is to discern the pattern Jesus gives to us, both in his life and in his teaching, and then to co-operate with grace and put it into practice. Human pride and arrogance, inside as well as outside the Church, stand opposed, so it is hardly surprising we still have to live with unresolved tension. The putting of it right cost Jesus his life. If we are still floundering it is not because we have not been shown the way but because we are sinners. There is always the conflict between the ideal and human frailty.

We have much to answer for at the end of a second millennium, looking at our brokenness and the shattered fragmentation of our churches. Are we reluctant to be brought back to heel, to return to a oneness of fold and Shepherd? Do we prefer our individuality and wilfulness? Yet there is a nostalgia, a wistful looking back. It is next required that we be stouthearted. We need to return to the centre.

St Gregory the Great, Pope, and Doctor of the Western Church (540-604), was given to see the true nature of leadership in the Church as revealed by Jesus in the gospel - self-sending in love, and in service of the brethren. What he perceived he sought to live out and to hand on, as far as human limitations would allow. If some of his concepts have been distorted by abuses in the medieval Papacy, or in later times and institutions, then there is all the more reason for going back behind all that to Gregory himself, as we wrestle still with questions of Primacy and Collegiality, lay-leadership, synodical government and so on.

As Bishop of Rome Gregory inherited a role of oversight, not only over his own diocese, but also, in a modified sense, over the majority of Patriarchates and Archbishoprics then existing. It was intended that the Roman See, founded it is claimed by St Peter the Apostle, should be both a focus and a guarantor of the unity of the worldwide Church, in doctrine and moral teaching. This was to be a primacy of love and service not of arrogant self-assertiveness. Each bishop had complete authority in his own see, while Patriarchs and Regional Bishops were to exercise a general oversight in their whole area. Concepts of universal jurisdiction and papal infallibility come only later. Decisions affecting the whole Church were taken collectively by the bishops in council. There were tensions and strains of course from the first, rivalry and jealousy, heresy and schism, but in the main, during the early years of the Church, a balance was kept. It is this, basically, that we seek to regain.

It is fascinating to see the different levels and strands of authority we have been describing actually brought into play. We have glimpses of them in Bede's Ecclesiastical History (7th - 8th century), where he cites some of the letters sent by Pope Gregory, at the turn of the sixth century, to the Bishop of Arles in Gaul and to Augustine, newly appointed Bishop to the English at Canterbury.

Here we see Pope Gregory exercising his general oversight - advising, citing universal and traditional norms, using diplomacy. But we also notice how he protects the rights of individual bishops in their sees, refusing to exercise undue authority himself and ensuring that each bishop keeps to his own patch too. However, he does encourage mutual support between them, the giving of advice to one another and, when needs be, a gentle pointing out of where things might be going wrong.

Augustine, writing from Canterbury to Rome, asks Gregory: '*what are to be our relations with the bishops of Gaul and Britain?*' (Eccl. Hist. chap. 27) To which Gregory replies:

We give you no authority over the bishops of Gaul, for since ancient times the Bishop of Arles has received the pallium from my predecessors, and his authority is to be in no way infringed . . . All the bishops of Britain, however, we commit to your charge.*

The demarcation lines, then, are clear: Augustine in England and the Bishop of Arles in Gaul have each a clearly defined authority, in their own dioceses and in a general way over the other bishops in their region. The **nature** of the authority is clearly defined by Gregory as well: ‘use your authority to instruct the unlearned, to encourage the weak, and correct the obstinate’. The bishop’s work is before all else, therefore, pastoral.

There are other indications, too, in the same letter, of the sort of oversight exercised by Gregory as Pope. He tells Augustine that he has himself contacted the Bishop of Arles in his regard:

We have already written to him, requesting him to offer you every assistance whenever you visit Gaul, and to ensure that his bishops observe no customs contrary to the laws of God our Maker.

Gregory here, then is also clearly concerned about orthodoxy of faith and soundness of teaching among the body of bishops. Indeed he encourages Augustine to look out for any lapses of this sort among his fellow-bishops and their flocks, even those on the Continent and outside his own direct area of oversight, and if necessary to point these lapses out. Nothing must be done, however, he reiterates, under his own initiative and in infringement of another’s authority:

Although we give you no authority over the bishops of Gaul, you should nevertheless advise, encourage and show them a good example. Recall the minds of any wrong-doers to the pursuit of holiness, for it is written in the Law: ‘when you pass through the harvest-field of another man, you may pluck some ears with your hand, but you may not reap it with a sickle’. (Deuteronomy, chap. 23. v. 25) (Ibid)

Gregory uses this Scripture quote to point his moral:

Similarly, you may not use THE SICKLE OF AUTHORITY in the field entrusted to another man, but use your good influence to separate the Lord's wheat from their sins, and by your teaching and persuasion bring them into the body of the Church.

Then, more emphatically still, Gregory insists once more that Augustine must not abuse another bishop's authority, for this is clean contrary to the traditional practice of the Church:

But no official action is to be taken without the authority of the Bishop of Arles, so that the long-established institutions of our fathers may not fall into disuse.

Here we can see very clearly indeed the overseeing role of Pope Gregory and yet his recognition of the need to share something of this function with his fellow-bishops, who are themselves guardians of orthodoxy and guarantors of the unity of the Church in their own place.

To smooth things over for Augustine Gregory also contacted Vergilius Bishop of Arles himself. Since Vergilius was successor to Etherius, who had consecrated Augustine, he perhaps needed some sort of introduction to the English Bishop about to be made his counterpart in Britain. Bede records Gregory's letter of 601:

To our most reverend and holy brother Vergilius, our fellow-bishop: Gregory, servant of the servants of God.

... if our mutual brother Bishop Augustine happens to visit you, I beg you to receive him with proper affection and kindness, so that he may be encouraged by your goodwill, and that others may learn how brotherly love is to be cultivated.

(Bede Eccl. Hist. chap. 28)

We note here Gregory's own description of his function as 'Servant of the servants of God', and his designation of Augustine as 'our mutual brother' - Collegiality affirmed.

It is highly probable that behind this diplomatic letter is Gregory's attempt to have some abuses corrected. He has already intimated as much to Augustine. Here he seems to broach matters with Vergilius:

And since it often happens that an independent observer sees what needs correction more clearly than the man on the spot, I ask that should he bring to your notice any wrong-doing among clergy or others, you make careful enquiry into these matters with his help.

(Ibid)

In the following chapter (29), Bede records how Gregory sends Augustine the *pallium* and arranges for the appointment of other bishops and Metropolitans in England. It is fascinating to see here the origins of the now Church of England Provinces of Canterbury and York and the formation of at least the See of Rochester. Augustine is to have a general primacy in the whole region, analogous to that of Gregory as universal primate:

You, my brother, are to exercise authority in the Name of our Lord and God Jesus Christ both over those bishops whom you shall consecrate, and any who shall be consecrated by the Bishop of York, and also over all the British bishops.

This latter statement of course proved the rub. There was another, much older generation of Christians already, still surviving in Britain - the Celts, and naturally they were not going to come very willingly to heel, as subsequent events make only too clear. There is straightaway, then, an all too human clash of authority.

Despite their gospel ideals both Gregory and Augustine could be called to account for intransigence and a ruthless determination to achieve their vision. Yet the Celtic tradition has survived, as its current resurgence makes abundantly clear. Ours it is to try to draw all the rich diversity of today's cosmopolitan Christianity, in Britain and beyond, back again into the oneness of the original gospel and Patristic tradition - that vision which Gregory, through

Augustine, sought to realise, and in which, through forgivable human limitation, they could only be partially successful.