

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

The Authority of the Ancient Councils and the Tradition of the Fathers*

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Quotations in Greek have here been transliterated.

The councils in the early Church

The scope of this essay is limited and restricted. It is no more than an introduction. Both subjects the role of the Councils in the history of the Church and the function of Tradition have been intensively studied in recent years. The purpose of the present essay is to offer some suggestions which may prove helpful in the further scrutiny of documentary evidence and in its theological assessment and interpretation. Indeed, the ultimate problem is ecclesiological. The Church historian is inevitably also a theologian. He is bound to bring in his personal options and commitments. On the other hand, it is imperative that theologians also should be aware of that *wide historical perspective* in which matters of faith and doctrine have been continuously discussed and comprehended. Anachronistic language must be carefully avoided. Each age must be discussed on its own terms.

The student of the Ancient Church must begin with the study of particular Councils, taken in their concrete historical setting, against their specific existential background, without attempting any overarching definition in advance. Indeed, it

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is precisely what historians are doing. There was no "Conciliar theory" in the Ancient Church, no elaborate "theology of the Councils," and even no fixed canonical regulations. The Councils of the Early Church, in the first three centuries, were occasional meetings, convened for special purposes, usually in the situation of urgency, to discuss particular items of common concern.

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They were *events*, rather than an institution. Or, to use the phrase of the late Dom Gregory Dix, “in the pre-Nicene times Councils were an occasional device, with no certain place in the scheme of Church government.”¹ Of course, it was commonly assumed and agreed, already at that time, that meeting and consultation of bishops, representing or rather personifying their respective local churches or “communities,” was a proper and normal method to manifest and to achieve the unity and consent in matters of faith and discipline. The sense of the Unity of the Church was strong in Early times, although it had not yet been reflected on the organizational level. The “collegiality” of the bishops was assumed in principle and the concept of the *Episcopatus unus* was already in the process of formation. Bishops of a particular area used to meet for the election and consecration of new bishops. Foundations had been laid for the future Provincial or Metropolitan system. But all this was rather a spontaneous movement. It seems that “Councils” came into existence first in Asia Minor, by the end of the second century, in the period of intensive defense against the spread of the “New Prophecy,” that is, of the Montanist enthusiastic explosion. In this situation it was but natural that the main emphasis should be put on “Apostolic Tradition,” of which bishops were guardians and witnesses in their respective *paroikiai*. It was in North Africa that a kind of Conciliar system was established in the third century. It was found that Councils were the best device for witnessing, articulating, and proclaiming the common mind of the Church and the accord and unanimity of local churches. Professor Georg Kretschmar has rightly said, in his recent study on the Councils of the Ancient Church, that the basic concern of the Early Councils was precisely with the Unity of the Church: “*Schon von ihrem Ursprung her ist ihr eigent-*

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liches Thema aber das Ringen um die rechte, geistliche Einheit der Kirche Gottes.”² Yet, this Unity was based on the identity of Tradition and the unanimity in faith, rather than on any institutional pattern.

The imperial or ecumenical council

The situation changed with the Conversion of the Empire. Since Constantine, or rather since Theodosius, it has been commonly assumed and acknowledged that Church was co-extensive with Commonwealth, that is, with the Universal Empire which has been christened. The “Conversion of the Empire” made the Universality of the Church more *visible* than ever before. Of course, it did not add anything to the essential and intrinsic Universality of the Christian

¹ Dom Gregory Dix, “Jurisdiction, Episcopal and Papal, in the Early Church,” *Laudate*, XVI (No. 62, June 1938), 108.

² Georg Kretschmar, “Die Konzile der Alten Kirche,” in: *Die ökumenischen Konzile der Christenheit*, hg. v. H. J. Margull, Stuttgart (1961), p. 1.

Church. But the new opportunity provided for its visible manifestation. It was in this situation that the first General Council was convened, the Great Council of Nicea. It was to become the model for the later Councils. "The new established position of the Church necessitated *ecumenical* action, precisely because Christian life was now lived in the world which was no longer organized on a basis of localism, but of the Empire as a whole. Because the Church has come out into the world the local churches had to learn to live no longer as self-contained units (as in practice, though not in theory, they have largely lived in the past), but as parts of a vast spiritual government."³ In a certain sense the General Councils as inaugurated at Nicea may be described as "Imperial Councils," *die Reichskonzile*, and this was probably the first and original meaning of the term "Ecumenical" as applied to the Councils.⁴ It would be out of place now to discuss at any length the vexed and controversial problem of the nature or character of that peculiar structure which was the new Christian Commonwealth, the theocratic *Res publica Christiana*, in which the Church was strangely wedded with the Empire.⁵ For our immediate purpose it is actually irrelevant. The Councils of the fourth century were still occasional meetings, or individual *events*, and their ultimate authority was still

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grounded in their conformity with the "Apostolic Tradition." It is significant that no attempt to develop a legal or canonical theory of "General Councils," as a seat of ultimate authority, with specific competence and models of procedure, was made at that time, in the fourth century, or later, although they were *de facto* acknowledged as a proper instance to deal with the questions of faith and doctrine and as an authority on these matters. It will be no exaggeration to suggest that Councils were never regarded as a canonical institution, but rather as occasional *charismatic events*. Councils were not regarded as periodical gatherings which had to be convened at certain fixed dates. And no Council was accepted as valid in advance, and many Councils were actually disavowed, in spite of their formal regularity. It is enough to mention the notorious Robber Council of 449. Indeed, those Councils which were actually recognized as "Ecumenical," in the sense of their binding and infallible authority, were recognized, immediately or after a delay, not because of their formal *canonical* competence, but because of their charismatic character: under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they have witnessed to the Truth, in

³ Dom Gregory Dix, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁴ See Eduard Schwartz, "Über die Reichskonzilien von Theodosius bis Justinian" (1921), reprinted in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV (Berlin, 1960), pp. 111-158.

⁵ Cf. my article, "Empire and Desert: Antinomies of Christian History," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, III (No. 2, 1957), 133-159.

conformity with the Scripture as handed down in Apostolic Tradition.⁶ There is no space now to discuss *the theory of reception*. In fact, there was no theory. There was simply an insight into the matters of faith. Hans Küng, in his recent book, *Strukturen der Kirche*, has suggested a helpful avenue of approach to this very problem. Indeed, Dr. Küng is not a historian, but his theological scheme can be fruitfully applied by historians. Küng suggested that we should regard the Church herself as a “Council,” an Assembly, and as a Council convened by God Himself, *aus göttlicher Berufung*, and the historic Councils, that is, the Ecumenical or General Councils, as Councils *aus menschlicher Berufung*, as a “representation” of the Church, indeed, a “true representation,” but yet no more than a representation.⁷ It is interesting to note that a similar conception had been made already many years ago by the great Russian Church historian, V. V. Bolotov, in his *Lectures on the History of the Ancient Church*. Church is *ecclesia*, an assembly, which is never adjourned.⁸ In other words,

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the ultimate authority and the ability to discern the truth in faith is vested in the Church which is indeed a “Divine institution,” in the proper and strict sense of the word, whereas no Council, and no “Conciliar institution,” is *de jure Divino*, except in so far as it happens to be a true image or manifestation of the Church herself. We may seem to be involved here in a vicious circle. We may be actually involved in it, if we insist on *formal* guarantees in doctrinal matters. But, obviously, such “guarantees” do not exist and cannot be produced, especially in advance. Certain “Councils” were actually failures, no more than *conciliabula*, and did err. And for that reason they were subsequently disavowed. The story of the Councils in the fourth century is, in this respect, very instructive.⁹ The claims of the Councils were accepted or rejected in the Church not on formal or “canonical” ground. And the verdict of the Church has been highly selective. *The Council is not above the Church*; this was the attitude of the Ancient Church. The Council is precisely a “representation.” This explains why the Ancient Church never appealed to “Conciliar authority” in general or *in abstracto*, but always to *particular* Councils, or rather to their “faith” and witness. Pere Yves Congar has recently published an excellent article on the “Primacy of the first four Ecumenical Councils,” and the evidence he has collected is highly

⁶ See V. V. Bolotov, *Lectures on the History of the Ancient Church*, III (1913), p. 320 ff. (Russian), and his *Letters to A. A. Kireev*, ed. by D. N. Jakshich (1931), pp. 31 ff. (Russian); also A. P. Dobroklonsky, “The Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church. Their Structure,” *Bogoslovje*, XI (2 & 3, 1936), 163-172 and 276-287 (Serbian.).

⁷ Hans Küng, *Strukturen der Kirche*, 1962, pp. 11-74.

⁸ *Bolotov*, *Lectures*, I (1907), pp. 9-14.

⁹ Cf. Monald Goemans, O.F.M., *Het algemeene Concilie in de vierde eeuw* (Nijmegen-Utrecht, 1945).

instructive.¹⁰ In fact, it was precisely the normative priority of Nicea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, that is, of their dogmatic ruling, which was felt to be a faithful and adequate expression of the perennial commitment of faith as once delivered unto the Church. Again the stress was not so much on “canonical” authority, but on the truth. It leads us to the most intricate and crucial problem what are the ultimate *criteria* of the Christian Truth?

Christ: the criterion of truth

There is no easy answer to this query. Indeed, there is a very simple answer *Christ is the Truth*. The source and the criterion of the Christian Truth is the Divine Revelation, in its twofold structure, in its two dispensations. The source

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of the Truth is the Word of God. Now, this simple answer was readily given and commonly accepted in the Ancient Church, as it may be also gratefully accepted in the divided Christendom of our own days. Yet, this answer does not solve the problem. In fact, it has been variously assessed and interpreted, to the point of most radical divergence. It only meant that the problem was actually shifted a step further. A new question came to be asked. How was Revelation to be understood? The Early Church had no doubt about the “sufficiency” of the Scriptures, and never tried to go beyond, and always claimed not to have gone beyond. But already in the Apostolic age itself the problem of “interpretation” arose in all its challenging sharpness. What was the guiding hermeneutical principle? At this point there was no other answer than the appeal to the “faith of the Church,” the faith and *kerygma* of the Apostles, the Apostolic *paradosis*. The Scripture could be understood only within the Church, as Origen strongly insisted, and as St. Irenaeus and Tertullian insisted before him. The appeal to Tradition was actually an appeal to the mind of the Church, her *phronema*. It was a method to discover and ascertain the faith as it had been always held, from the very beginning: *semper creditum*. The *permanence* of Christian belief was the most conspicuous sign and token of its truth: no innovations.¹¹ And this permanence of the Holy Church's faith could be appropriately demonstrated by the witnesses from the past. It was for that reason, and for that purpose, that “the ancients,” *hoi palaioi*, were usually invoked and quoted in theological discussions. This “argument from antiquity,” however, had to be used with certain caution. Occasional references

¹⁰ “Primauté des quatre premiers conciles oecuméniques,” *Le Concile et les Conciles, Contribution à l'histoire de la vie conciliaire de l'Eglise* (1960), p. 75-109.

¹¹ For further discussion of this topic see my articles: “The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, IX (No. 2, 1964), 181-200, and “Scripture and Tradition: An Orthodox point of view,” *Dialog*, II (No. 4, 1963), 288-293. Cf. also “Revelation and Interpretation,” in: *Biblical Authority for Today*, edited by Alan Richardson and W. Schweitzer (London and Philadelphia, 1951), pp. 163-180.

to old times and casual quotations from old authors could be often ambiguous and even misleading. This was well understood already at the time of the great Baptismal controversy in the third century, and the question about the validity or authority of “ancient customs” had been formally raised at that time. Already Tertullian contended that *consuetudines* [customs] in the Church had to be examined in the light of truth: *Dominus nosrter Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit* [Our Lord Christ designated himself, not as custom but

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as truth; *de virginibus velandis*, I.I]. The phrase was taken up by St. Cyprian and was adopted by the Council at Carthage in 256. In fact, “antiquity” as such might happen to be no more than an inveterate error: *nam antiquitas sine veritate vetustas erroris est* [for antiquity without truth is the age old error], in the phrase of St. Cyprian (*epist.* 74.9). St. Augustine also used the same phrase: *In Evangelio Dominus, Ego sum, inquit, veritas. Non dixit, Ego sum consuetudo* [In the Gospel the Lord says “I am the truth.” He did not say I am custom; *de baptismo*, III. 6.9]. “Antiquity” as such was not necessarily a truth, although the Christian truth was intrinsically an “ancient” truth, and “innovations” in the Church had to be resisted. On the other hand, the argument “from tradition” was first used by the heretics, by Gnostics, and it was this usage of theirs that prompted St. Irenaeus to elaborate his own conception of Tradition in opposition to the false “traditions” of the heretics which were alien to the mind of the Church.¹² The appeal to “antiquity” or “traditions” had to be selective and discriminative. Certain alleged “traditions” were simply wrong and false. One had to detect and to identify the “true Tradition,” the authentic Tradition which could be traced back to the authority of the Apostles and be attested and confirmed by an universal *consensio* of Churches. In fact, however, this *consensio* could not be so easily discovered. Certain questions were still open. The main criterion of St. Irenaeus was valid: Tradition Apostolic and Catholic (or Universal). Origen, in the preface to his *De Principiis*, tried to describe the scope of the existing “agreement” which was to his mind binding and restrictive, and then he quoted a series of important topics which had to be further explored. There was, again, a considerable variety of local traditions, in language and discipline, even within the unbroken communion in faith and *in sacris*. It suffices to recall at this point the Pascal controversy between Rome and the East, in which the whole question of the authority of ancient habits came to the fore. One should also recall the conflicts between Carthage and Rome, and also between Rome and Alexandria, in the third century, and the increasing tension between Alexandria and Antioch which

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¹² See B. Reynders, “Paradosis, Le progrès de lidée de tradition jusquà Saint Irénee,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, V (1933), 155-191, and “La polemique de Saint Irénee,” *ibidem*, VII (1935), 5-27.

came to its tragic climax, and impass, in the fifth century. Now, in this age of the intense theological controversy and context, all participating groups used to appeal to tradition and “antiquity.” “Chains” of ancient testimonies were compiled on all sides in the dispute. These testimonies had to be carefully scrutinized and examined on a basis more comprehensive than “antiquity” alone. Certain local traditions, liturgical and theological, were finally discarded and disavowed by the overarching authority of an “ecumenical” *consensus*. A sharp confrontation of diverse theological traditions took place already at the Council of Ephesus. The Council was actually split in twain the “Ecumenical” Council of St. Cyril and Rome and the *conciliabulum* of the Orient. Indeed, the reconciliation was achieved, and yet there was still a tension. The most spectacular instance of condemnation of a theological tradition, of long standing and of considerable, if rather local, renown, was, of course, the dramatic affair of Three Chapters. At this point a question of principle has been raised: to what extent was it fair and legitimate to disavow the faith of those who had died in peace and in communion with the Church? There was a violent debate on this matter, especially in the West, and strong arguments were produced against such retrospective discrimination. Nevertheless, the Chapters were condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council. “Antiquity” was overruled by Ecumenical *consensio*, as strained as it probably was.

The meaning of the appeal to the Fathers

It has been rightly observed that appeal to “antiquity” was changing its function and character with the course of time. The Apostolic past was still at hand, and within the reach of human memory, in the times of St. Irenaeus or Tertullian. Indeed, St. Irenaeus had heard in his youth the oral instruction of St. Polycarp, the immediate disciple of St. John the Divine. It was only the third generation since Christ! The memory of the Apostolic age was still fresh. The scope of Christian history was brief and limited. The main concern in this early age was with the Apostolic *foundations*, with

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the *initial delivery* of the *kerygma*. Accordingly, Tradition meant at that time, primarily, the original “delivery” or “deposition.” The question of accurate transmission, over a bit more than one century, was comparatively simple, especially in the Churches founded by the Apostles themselves. Full attention was given, of course, to the lists of episcopal succession (cf. St. Irenaeus or Hegesippus), but it was not difficult to compile these lists. The question of “succession,” however, appeared to be much more complicated for the subsequent generations, more removed from the Apostolic time. It was but natural, under these new conditions, that emphasis should shift from the question of initial “Apostolicity” to the problem of the preservation of the “deposit.” Tradition came to mean “transmission,” rather than “delivery.” The question of the intermediate links, of “succession” in the wide and comprehensive sense of the

word became especially urgent. It was the problem of faithful witnesses. It was in this situation that the authority of the Fathers was for the first time formally invoked: they were witnesses of the permanence or identity of the *kerygma*, as transmitted from generation to generation.¹³ Apostles *and* Fathers these two terms were generally and commonly coupled together in the argument from Tradition, as it was used in the Third and Fourth centuries. It was this *double* reference, both to the *origin* and to the unfailing and continuous *preservation*, that warranted the authenticity of belief. On the other hand, Scripture was formally acknowledged and recognized as the ground and foundation of faith, as the Word of God and the Writ of the Spirit. Yet, there was still the problem of right and adequate interpretation. Scripture and Fathers were usually quoted together, that is, *kerygma* and *exegesis*— *hê graphê kai hoi pateres* [the scripture and the fathers].

The reference, or even a direct appeal, “*to the Fathers*” was a distinctive and salient note of theological research and discussion in the period of the great General or Ecumenical Councils, beginning with that of Nicea. The term has never been formally defined. It was used, occasionally and sporadically, already by early ecclesiastical writers. Often it simply denoted Christian teachers and leaders of previous

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generations. It was gradually becoming a title for the bishops, in so far as they were appointed teachers and witnesses of faith. Later the title was applied specifically to bishops in Councils. The common element in all these cases was the teaching office or task. “Fathers” were those who transmitted and propagated the right doctrine, the teaching of the Apostles, who were guides and masters in Christian instruction and catechesis. In this sense it was emphatically applied to great Christian writers. It must be kept in mind that the main, if not also the only, manual of faith and doctrine was, in the Ancient Church, precisely the Holy Writ. And for that reason the renowned interpreters of Scripture were regarded as “Fathers” in an eminent sense.¹⁴ “Fathers” were teachers, first of all, *doctores*, *didaskaloi*. And they were teachers in so far as they were witnesses, *testes*. These two functions must be distinguished, and yet they are most intimately intertwined. “Teaching” was an Apostolic task: “teach all nations.” And it was in this commission that their “authority” was rooted: it was, in fact, the authority to bear witness. Two major points must be made in this connection. *First*, the phrase “the Fathers of the Church”

¹³ Cf. P. Smulders, “Le mot et le concept de tradition chez les Pères,” *Recherches de Science religieuse*, 40 (1952), 41-62, and Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions, Etude historique* (Paris 1960), p. 57 ff.

¹⁴ See, first of all, J. Fessler, *Institutiones Patrologiae*, denuo recensuit, auxit, edidit B. Jungmann, I (Innsbruck, 1890), pp. 15-57; E. Amann, “Pères de l’église,” *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, XII, cc. 1192-1215; Basilius Steidle, O.S.B., “Heilige Vaterschaft,” *Benedictinische Monatsschrift*, XIV (1932), 215-226; “Unsere Kirchenväter,” *ibidem*, 387-398 and 454-466.

has actually an obvious *restrictive* accent: they were acting not just as individuals, but rather as *virī ecclesiastici* (the favourite expression of Origen), on behalf and in the name of the Church. They were spokesmen for the Church, expositors of her faith, keepers of her Tradition, witnesses of truth and faith, *magistri probabiles*, in the phrase of St. Vincent. And in that was their “authority” grounded.¹⁵ It leads us back to the concept of “representation.” The late G. L. Prestige has rightly observed:

The creeds of the Church grew out of the teaching of the Church: the general effect of heresy was rather to force old creeds to be tightened up than to cause fresh creeds to be constructed. Thus the most famous and most crucial of all creeds, that of Nicea, was only a new edition of an existing Palestinian confession. And a further important fact always ought to be remembered. *The real intellectual work, the vital interpretative thought, was not contributed by the Councils that promulgated the creeds, but by the theological teachers who supplied and explained the formulae which the Councils adopted. The teaching of Nicea, which finally commended itself, represented the views of intellectual giants work-*

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*ing for a hundred years before and for fifty years after the actual meeting of the Council.*¹⁶

The Fathers were true inspirers of the Councils, while being present and in absentia, and also often after they have gone to Eternal Rest. For that reason, and in this sense, the Councils used to emphasize that they were “following the Holy Fathers”— *epomenoi tois agiois patrasin*, as Chalcedon has said. *Secondly*, it was precisely the *consensus patrum* which was authoritative and binding, and not their private opinions or views, although even they should not be hastily dismissed. Again, this *consensus* was much more than just an empirical agreement of individuals. The true and authentic *consensus* was that which reflected the mind of the Catholic and Universal Church *to ekklesiastikon phronēma*.¹⁷ It was that kind of *consensus* to which St. Irenaeus was referring when he contended that neither a special “ability,” nor a “deficiency” in speech of individual leaders in the Churches could affect the identity of their witness, since the “power of tradition” *virtus traditionis* was always and everywhere the same (*Adv. Haeres.* I. 10.2)

¹⁵ Cf. Basilius Steidle, *Patrologia* (Friburgi Brig., 1937), p. 9: *qui saltem aliquo tempore per vinculum fidei et caritatis Ecclesiae adhaeserunt testesque sunt veritatis catholicae.*

¹⁶ G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics* (London, 1940), p. 8. Italics are mine.

¹⁷ See Eusebius, *hist. eccl.*, V. 28.6, quoting an anonymous treatise, *Against the heresy of Artemon*, of the third century. The attribution of this treatise to Hippolytus is doubtful.

. The preaching of the Church is always identical: *constans et aequaliter perseverans* (*ibid.*, III. 24.1). The true consensus is that which manifests and discloses this perennial identity of the Church's faith *aequaliter perseverans*.¹⁸

The teaching *authority* of the Ecumenical Councils is grounded in the *infallibility* of the Church. The ultimate "authority" is vested in the Church which is for ever the Pillar and the Foundation of Truth. It is not primarily a canonical authority, in the formal and specific sense of the term, although canonical strictures or sanctions may be appended to conciliar decisions on matters of faith. It is a *charismatic* authority, grounded in the assistance of the Spirit: *for it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us*.

¹⁸ See my article "Offenbarung, Philosophie and Theologie," *Zwischen den Zeiten*, IX (1931), pp. 463-480. Cf. Karl Adam, *Christus unser Bruder* (1926), p. 116 f.: *Der konservative Traditionsgeist der Kirche fließt unmittelbar aus ihrer christozentrischen Grundhaltung. Von dieser Grundstellung aus wandte sich die Kirche von jeher gegen die Tyrannei von Führerpersönlichkeiten, von Schulen and Richtungen. Da, wo durch diese Schulen das christliche Bewusstsein, die überlieferte Botschaft von Christus, getrübt oder bedroht schien, da zögerte sie nicht, selbst über ihre grössten Söhne hinwegzuschreiten, über einen Origenes, Augustin, ja hier und dort selbst über einen Thomas von Aquin. Und überall da, wo grundsätzlich nicht die Überlieferung, nicht das Feststehen auf dem Boden der Geschichte, der urchristlichen Gegebenheit, der lebendigen fortdauernden Gemeinschaft, sondern die eigene Spekulation and das eigene kleine Erlebnis and das eigene arme Ich zum Träger der Christusbotschaft gemacht werden sollte, da sprach sie umgehend ihr Anathema aus ... Die Geschichte der kirchlichen Verkündigung ist nichts anderes als ein zähes Festhalten an Christus, eine folgestrenge Durchführung des Gebotes Christi: Nur einer sei eurer Lehrer, Christus. Actually, this pathetic passage is almost a paraphrase of the last chapter of the (first) *Commonitorium* of St. Vincent, in which he sharply discriminates between the common and universal mind of the Church and the *privatae opiniunculae* of individuals: *quidquid vero, quamvis ille sanctus et doctus, quamvis episcopus, quamvis confessor et martyr, praeter omnes aut etiam contra omnes senserit* (cap. XXVII).*