

Disagreement and Authority: Comparing Ecclesial and Scientific Practices

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Within the context of faith, all authority is seen as deriving from God. God, as creator, is the source of the very existence and nature of things, including humans, the societies they constitute, and the proper functioning of such societies. Within the context of secular thinking, however, authority cannot be defined, accounted for, or explained in this way, but must be considered in other terms, for instance in terms of a social contract. What both contexts agree on is that authority structures should act always in line with, or for the sake of, the common good. There is of course a danger of circularity here: the common good that determines the degrees of freedom of the structures of authority is itself very often determined by those very same structures of authority. The system can therefore seriously malfunction, giving rise to periods of intense disagreement, especially if sections of the authority structure become purely self-referential. Now, in recent years, disagreement as a philosophical topic has started to attract considerable attention, giving rise to rich debates not only about disagreement in itself but also about specifically political and religious disagreement (e.g. Feldman & Warfield 2010; McMahon 2009; Zagzebski 2012). Moreover, in some recent official documents of the Catholic Church, we see a similar growing concern about how to deal with religious pluralism, with dialogue among religions, and with the tension that sometimes arises even within the Church between theologians and the Magisterium (e.g. ICT 2012; CDF 1990; CDF 2000). Such considerations are very often carried out without any reference to how disagreement is handled in the natural sciences. What lies behind this is, most probably, the assumption that the dynamics of inquiry within

the natural sciences, with its special engagement with material reality via experimentation, is totally different from that of the more human or religious areas of inquiry.

A new situation is however now becoming increasingly evident: the idea of a strict dichotomy between the dynamics of disagreement within science and that within other areas of inquiry is being undermined by various sociological studies of science and epistemology. What needs to be done therefore is to revisit the issue of ecclesial disagreement, together with the associated idea of doctrinal authority, with an eye on what happens in the sciences. As a result, such a study can be a very useful starting point for further research in what may be called comparative methodology. The structure of this paper is very simple. The first section will focus on the dynamics of doctrinal authority within the Church; the second will focus on the same aspects within the scientific community; and the third will compare the two, ending with some suggestions. Since each area is vast, I will focus primarily on two particularly influential authors and explore their ideas at some depth.

1. Church authority

The dynamics of theological inquiry within the Councils and within other kinds of meetings in the course of the history of the Church has been studied in innumerable ways, but one of the most profound, inspiring, and influential accounts remains that of John Henry Newman. Rather than present an overview of all the various currents of thought related to the Church's theological self-understanding, I will, as mentioned above, simplify the matter by focusing at first exclusively on some of Newman's contributions that are most relevant for this paper, referring mainly to his A Grammar of Assent and An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine. My understanding is that these contributions are typical of the very

best the Church has to offer as regards the explicitation of the process whereby doctrinal inquiry and decision making happen within the ecclesial community.

We can start with the most general description of deliberation and assent. In this area, the key notion in Newman's thinking is what he called the illative sense, the sense that 'determines what science cannot determine, the limit of converging probabilities and the reasons sufficient for a proof' (Newman 1903, ch. 9, sec. 3; p. 360). Newman was convinced that there is no step by step logical sequence that leads an individual from particular probabilistic judgements to certainty. What we see rather is a culmination of probabilities, which are 'independent of each other, arising out of the nature and circumstances of the particular case which is under review; probabilities too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such a conversion' (Newman 1903, ch. 8, sec. 2; p. 288). He postulated the illative sense to account for the way individuals bridge the gap between probabilistic judgements and certainty. The gap is real because no amount of probabilities can add up to full certainty. In other words, adding probabilities can lead only to some other probability and never to certainty. Newman was aware of this issue and solved it by resorting to Isaac Newton who had argued that, in general, a limit of a series can indeed be different in kind from the elements of that series. For instance, for a series of regular polygons inscribed within a circle with increasing number of sides, the limit is the circumference of the circle, which is not itself a polygon. Newman argued that a series of probable judgements is like this series of regular polygons: it converges onto something that differs essentially from itself. It converges onto a judgement that is not itself probable but certain.¹ And the way we make this jump from probabilities to certainty is by exercising the illative sense.

1. Newman discusses this in a section on informal inference: Newman 1903, ch. 8, sec. 2, § 3.

This brief sketch is enough to show that Newman is not talking about a form of inference. The illative sense is not a logical procedure whereby a general proposition is justified by a finite number of exemplars – it is not induction. When Newman talks about the illative sense, he is exploring a particular aspect of human cognition, and what he refers to by the expression ‘illative sense’, even though related to logical processes that characterize thinking, is primarily a characteristic of human beings. What we have here, therefore, is a phenomenological study of the attaining of certitude. Moreover, because the illative sense is a characteristic of human beings that can lie dormant, as it were, when no occasion arises to manifest it, and can also be made better by frequent use, it can be called a virtue. It is clear that Newman is not describing here a cognitive characteristic that is specific to religious beliefs. The way a sequence of probable judgements can converge and can thereby enable the human person to arrive at a judgement that is not itself probable but certain occurs in the other areas of human intellectual activity. What happens in the religious sphere is a particularly clear case of such a process. One can see therefore that Newman’s doctrine of the illative sense lies within the long tradition of Catholic thinking that adopts a naturalistic appreciation of the human spiritual vocation by highlighting how what is spiritual, in this case the act of faith, is not something inherently against what is material, but its perfection.

When considering a deliberation within the Church, an instance of doctrinal authority, we need of course to include a higher degree of complexity, especially because of the social nature of the event. Newman was aware that the illative sense works in different ways in different people: ‘The inquirer has first of all to decide on the point from which he is to start in the presence of the received accounts; on what side, from what quarter he is to approach them; on what principles his discussion is to be conducted [...] It is plain how incessant will be the call here or there for the exercise of a definite judgment, how little that judgement will be helped on by logic, and how intimately it will be dependent upon the intellectual

complexion of the writer' (Newman 1903, ch. 9, sec. 3, § 1; p. 364). For Newman the role of the illative sense is central. For him, agreement is assured not because there is an authority structure that checks all the logical steps one by one. It is assured primarily because the illative sense can rise above all superficial differences. He writes: 'the fact remains, that, in any inquiry about things in the concrete, men differ from each other, not so much in the soundness of their reasoning as in the principle which govern its exercise, that those principles are of a personal character, that where there is no common measure of minds, there is no common measure of arguments, and that the validity of proof is determined not by any scientific test, but by the illative sense' (Newman 1903, ch. 10, sec. 2; p. 413).

Is this enough to guarantee the attaining of truth? At one stage, Newman indicates that the illative sense is not enough. He thinks that, for attaining true certitudes, as opposed to false ones, we need divine intervention: 'this does suggest to us, that there is something deeper in our differences than the accident of external circumstances; and that we need the interposition of a Power, greater than human teaching and human argument, to make our beliefs true and our minds one' (Newman 1903, ch. 9, sec. 3, § 2; p. 375).

We find many more interesting insights in his famous work An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine. Let me highlight two points that are of special importance for my inquiry. First, there is the claim that, since the development of ideas within the Christian community is inevitable, there must be a structure of authority. This dynamism emerges because divine revelation is not just operative but also acknowledged as such: 'Revelation has introduced a new law of divine governance over and above those laws which appear in the natural course of the world [...] As the Creator rested on the seventh day from the work which He had made, yet he "worketh hitherto"; so He gave the Creed once for all in the beginning, yet blesses its growth still, and provides for its increase' (Newman 1890, p. 85). Newman's analogy involving organic life is already evident. He elaborates this point

further by suggesting that church authority is within the believing community what conscience is within the individual. This parallelism has interesting consequences especially because individual conscience is not infallible. Newman develops Bellarmine's insight that just as we are obliged to obey our conscience even though we know that it is not infallible so also we are obliged to obey Church authority even when we do not see the point: 'as obedience to conscience, even supposing conscience ill-formed, tends to the improvement of our moral nature, and ultimately our knowledge, so obedience to our ecclesiastical superior may subserve our growth in illumination and sanctity, even though he should command what is extreme or inexpedient, or teach what is external to his legitimate province' (Newman 1890, p. 87).

The second point worth highlighting is his famous list of criteria that distinguish genuine developments of an idea from corruptions. What lies behind all his criteria is the model of biological growth, such as that of a seed: 'it is plain, first of all, that a corruption is a word attaching to organised matters only; a stone may be crushed to powder, but it cannot be corrupted. Corruption, on the contrary, is the breaking up of life, preparatory to its termination' (p. 170). The criteria are seven. First, a development is genuine if it preserves the original idea's type (just as animals do not change their kind as they grow, so also ideas). Secondly, genuine development manifests the continuity of the original idea's principles (just as mathematics unfolds from a set of axioms and postulates, so also doctrines can be said to unfold from a set of principles that direct their development). Thirdly, genuine development is indicated when the original idea becomes capable of assimilating other ideas thus giving rise to a more extensive unity of comprehension. Fourthly, a genuine development is indicated when the later expression of an idea is linked to its earlier expression in a way that is logically consistent. Fifthly, the development of an idea is genuine when it realizes some of the anticipations inherent within the original idea. Sixthly, a genuine development conserves

what was good in antecedent stages and adds to it; it does not correct comprehensively but corroborates. And lastly, a genuine development of an idea, unlike its corruption, is not violent and transient, but characterised by being peaceful and long lasting.²

These criteria together with the illative sense give a reasonably clear picture of how doctrinal authority should function according to Newman. Some may rightly point out that he does not do much to show how the illative sense operates within a community, and how this operation is related to the role of the Magisterium. For this we need to go to some of his other writings, such as On Consulting the Faithful on Matters of Doctrine, and the Preface he wrote to the third edition of the Via Media.

In the first, he explains that within a community of inquirers the illative sense functions not simply as a mere summation of the various individual illative senses but as a truly communal illative sense. What he calls the 'consensus fidelium' is a sort of collective virtue (what he calls phronema) in parallel with the individual virtue of practical reason (phronesis). To some scholars, these views indicate that Newman's position lies squarely within the current discussion on social epistemology, where belief-formation is not seen as an individual process but as a communal one that depends on the epistemic virtues shared by the members of that community (e.g. Aquino 2004). Once we speak of virtues within a community, we include the possibility that some individuals grow in such epistemic virtues more than others. This way allows an interesting and philosophically rich account of the role of the Magisterium within the Catholic hierarchy. Just as there is need for education as regards individual conscience, so also as regards the collective illative sense. This latter kind of

2. Newman explains and elaborates these criteria, which he describes as 'Notes of varying cogency, independence and applicability', in chapter 5 of Newman 1890, and then discusses each at length in subsequent chapters.

education is realized through an ongoing interaction with the authority structure within the church community, involving Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium.

In the Preface to the third edition of the Via Media, he deals explicitly with the difference between the methods of theology and those of science. He starts by admitting that all honest intellectual pursuits are driven by the desire to attain truth, but he swiftly adds that in religious matters due consideration needs to be given to the complexity of the people involved. The faithful are not all intellectuals. Some live out their faith supported only by simple devotional practices, and, as a consequence, they show a natural resistance to change. For such people, ‘what is new and strange is as repulsive, often as dangerous, as falsehood is to the scientific’ (sec. 9, p. lii). Newman is here touching on the delicate issue of how we are to respect the process of growth that is appropriate to the people to whom we are responsible. If education, by definition, involves an element of facing people with novelty, it involves also an element of helping them to accept it, and this latter task depends on the state they are in at the start. It is not always wise, Newman argues, to publish new truths irrespective of whether the people are ready to accept them, and to accept them in the right way. In these matters, one element that distinguishes the religious from the scientific community is that the former is fully aware of the need to expose the faithful to new truths slowly, and only when absolutely necessary, so as to avoid confusion, perplexity, disorder, and self-doubt. The scientific community, on the contrary, is usually quite happy to shock. Newman writes:

Here we see the necessary contrast between religious inquiry or teaching, and investigation in purely secular matters. Much is said in this day by men of science about the duty of honesty in what is called the pursuit of truth, – by ‘pursuing truth’ being meant the pursuit of facts. It is just now reckoned a great moral virtue to be fearless and thorough in inquiry into facts; and, when science crosses and breaks the received path of Revelation, it is reckoned a serious imputation upon the ethical

character of religious men, whenever they show hesitation to shift at a minute's warning their position, and to accept as truths shadowy views at variance with what they have ever been taught and have held. But the contrast between the cases is plain. The love and pursuit of truth in the subject-matter of religion, if it be genuine, must always be accompanied by the fear of error, of error which may be sin (sec. 10, pp. liii-liv).

In this context, one can hardly avoid thinking of the much discussed clash between Galileo and the Church. Did the Church err in this case? Here we have an excellent opportunity to appreciate Newman's views on the way disagreement can, and should, be handled within the Church, especially when compared to the way it is handled within the natural sciences. For Newman the answer is clear: given the lack of definite proof, the Church did not err: 'it was safe, not dishonest, to be slow in accepting what nevertheless turned out to be true' (sec. 10, p. lv). We notice immediately how the fundamental point for Newman is to ensure not only the honest journey towards the truth but also safety. Even if a proposition is not heretical, it is perfectly legitimate for the leaders of the ecclesial community to hold that some items of new knowledge can be detrimental to some people while not to others. Newman insists that it is wiser and kinder for teachers to limit their teaching to what can be digested progressively by the students rather than to offer everything all at once, come what may. Likewise, he argues, novelty that can generate disagreement and disturbance within the ecclesial community should be divulged slowly, in line with the conditions required for its proper acceptance.

With these ideas, Newman is rightly recognized as one of the most prominent theologians who defended a theological understanding, as opposed to a historicist understanding, of the development of Christian doctrine. Such a theological understanding, highlighting the supernatural nature of continuity within the process of development, and recalling that the deposit of faith is not only a set of propositions about God and the Church but also the divine mystery communicated by the indwelling Spirit, sees the historical

unfolding of the deposit of faith as a coherent whole, where the implicit aspects are intimately connected to the explicit aspects. Other protagonists include Maurice Blondel, who described the development of doctrine as the shift from the implicitly lived to the explicitly known. Within the experience of the living Christian community there is much that remains subconscious, unrecognized, provisionally and partly irreducible to explicit thought (Blondel 1904, p. 210). Recent advances in philosophical hermeneutics have sustained such proposals, and the CDF arrived finally at a distinction between the meaning of a dogma, which always remains true, and the dogmatic formulations of the Church, which are true within the context of those who understand them, but remain open to further clarification and therefore changeable if needs arise: ‘it often happens that ancient dogmatic formulas and others closely connected with them remain living and fruitful in the habitual usage of the Church, but with suitable expository and explanatory additions that maintain and clarify their original meaning. In addition, it has sometimes happened that in this habitual usage of the Church certain of these formulas gave way to new expressions which, proposed and approved by the Sacred Magisterium, presented more clearly or more completely the same meaning’ (*Mysterium Ecclesiae*, § 5).³

2. Scientific authority

The way the theories proposed by natural science are, or should be, evaluated has been the object of intense study for hundreds of years. It is commonly believed that the issue is

3. Important theological works, within this tradition, about the development of Christian doctrine include: de Lubac 1948; Dhanis 1953; Rahner 1960; Poulat 1962; Ratzinger 1966; Schillebeeckx 1967; Alszeghy 1988.

simply a matter of having recourse to a decisive experiment, but much more is involved. Although most philosophers involved in this area produced work that was primarily a specialized self-reflection and explicitation of their own scientific method and contributions (for instance Galileo and Newton), there were some who tried to see how the workings of science could affect and reform the entire discipline of philosophy. These latter thinkers had an enormous impact because they helped to transform what was in their time a somewhat restricted and specialized human activity into a way of thinking and a style of living for the masses, into a scientific mentality, with much broader implications than science itself. I will consider one of these latter thinkers for this section: Charles Sanders Peirce, famous for his launching of the philosophy of pragmatism, and arguably the philosopher whose ideas remain the most influential within current cultural trends that are becoming increasingly dominant within global economic and political transactions.⁴

In 1877, Peirce published a paper entitled ‘The Fixation of Belief’, one of six papers on the method of science, and it is this paper that supplies some of the clearest insights on how authority is conceived within scientific practice, and how such authority should extend to the full range of philosophical activity and indeed to all human practices. He starts by analysing belief and doubt. For him, they are not abstract descriptions of the state of an individual but,

4. I focus only on Peirce mainly for convenience, and to make this paper’s line of argument clearer within the space available. Since Peirce, pragmatist ideas have had various champions, of one form or another, including for instance Richard Rorty, who sees the authority structure of science as just one of the many possible systems that can enable us to achieve our goals, and Hilary Putnam, who argues somewhat differently that, on a pragmatist understanding, science has the special role of offering the basis for the evaluation of human practices and for democracy.

in a way, grades of satisfaction or inner calm. Doubt is a state associated with dissatisfaction from which we attempt to distance ourselves so as to arrive at the state of belief, thereby gaining a state of satisfaction and calm. Inquiry is nothing more than the struggle produced by the irritation of doubt, the struggle to return to the state of belief. This view explains how both individuals and groups tend to change their beliefs as little as possible, and then only when really obliged. With this background in place, he proceeds to articulate four different ways of how to settle opinion. These four ways are the most important aspect for our consideration.

According to the first way of retaining the peaceful state of belief, what he calls the method of tenacity, an individual retains his or her belief come what may, by sheer willpower, somewhat like the ostrich, he says, that buries its head to avoid the anxiety of possible danger. What undermines this method is society itself, which is always full of a variety of different opinions that bombard the individual from all sides. But for an individual or group that retreats into isolation from others, the method of tenacity is always possible.

The second method, the method of authority, is the one he identifies with the Catholic Church. It involves the founding of an institution whose purpose is to keep correct doctrines before the entire group and to prevent contrary opinions from emerging and flourishing. The entire group endows this institution with the required degree of power to function in this way, which may include punishment and expulsion, or even torture and death. Peirce writes: 'This method has, from the earliest times, been one of the chief means of upholding correct theological and political doctrines, and of preserving their universal or catholic character. In Rome, especially, it has been practiced from the days of Numa Pompilius to those of Pius Nonus' (Peirce 1992, p. 117). He acknowledges that this method has been successful through the centuries and has had the most majestic results. He is even convinced that 'for the mass of mankind, then, there is perhaps no better method than this. If it is their highest impulse to be

intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain' (Peirce 1992, p. 118). He quickly adds, however, that all such 'priestridden' groups of inquiry are unstable because they always contain some subgroup of individuals who want to think for themselves, and who thus brew doubt and disquiet.

His third method involves recourse to a priori truths. In order to pass from the irritating state of doubt to the stable state of belief and to secure agreement within a community of inquirers, instead of resorting to an established authority we can encourage everyone to figure out what is more in line with reason. Opinions will thus be progressively ironed out as the community moves increasingly towards more universal truths. For Peirce, this method is more intellectually respectable than the others but is still unsatisfactory. Although its use has given rise to impressive and influential metaphysical systems in the course of history, it actually makes 'inquiry something similar to the development of taste' (Peirce 1992, p. 119). He may be making a rhetorical flourish here, an exaggeration, but his main objection has a point. This method does not emphasize agreement with experience but consistency within a set of beliefs.

The fourth method, the one preferred by Peirce, is the method of scientific investigation. This assumes that 'there are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; [...] and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion' (Peirce 1992, p. 120). Peirce concedes that the other methods have their advantages, but since they have no inherent tendency to ensure that opinion eventually converges onto fact, they remain inferior to this fourth method of the natural sciences.

This foundational paper which I just summarized is not the only place where Peirce compares authority structures within the Church with those within science. Overall, his attitude is certainly not one of wanting to debunk religion. He has his own argument for the

existence of God, and defends a form of religion that dovetails smoothly with science as he understands it. There is truth in religious claims in so far as they are experiential even though vague. What he cannot stand is when 'theology pretends to be a science' (Peirce 1931-1958, vol. 6, § 3), his reason being that this form of religion suffers from the vices that are inherent within the first three methods of inquiry mentioned above: tenacity, authority, and detachment from experience. For him, non-theologized religious claims are respectable because, being capable of generating doubt, they can indeed launch a genuine inquiry. He wants however to keep such religious claims at the level of practical guides that promote a good life; he wants to keep them away from the clutches of theologians who are ever prone to transform them into hypotheses within an inquiry. He justifies his position by referring to the never ending disputes among theologians (Peirce 1931-1958, vol. 6, § 438). Of course, one may object here that Peirce is somewhat inconsistent when he assumes that, for science, reasoning on experience can always make opinion converge onto fact while, for religion, reasoning can never accomplish the same thing. He seems to assume that reasoning is simply not sturdy enough to cope with the explicitation of religious claims.

For Peirce, the way forward is to have a theology-free church, which he describes as a religion of love, an agapistic evolutionary process (Peirce 1931-1958, vol. 6, § 493). In this way, the religious dimension of humanity will overcome its self-love, its self-seeking, just as the scientific community has done via the adoption of the genuine scientific method. The sacrifice scientists make in renouncing their presuppositions when faced with contrary evidence is the same kind of sacrifice genuine religious people need to make as regards religion. All in all, it is clear that for Peirce science can teach the Church how to grow towards perfection. His view guarantees that the religious person 'will gladly go forward, sure that the truth is not split into two warring doctrines, and that any change that knowledge

can work in his faith can only affect its expression, not the deep mystery expressed' (Peirce 1931-1958, vol. 6, § 432).⁵

3. Comparison

Although these two major thinkers formulated and published their work about a century ago, traces of their views are still with us today in some form or other. Newman is rightly acknowledged as a major influence behind Vatican II, and Peirce is viewed by many as the founding father of a pragmatic scientific attitude that is fast becoming global. Nevertheless, one needs to acknowledge that the 20th century has seen much further exploration in these areas and both positions need some serious amendments.

Newman's approach may be questioned because it simply draws a blanket over the very issue under investigation. If (and I emphasize the hypothetical form of my claim here) he is proposing the existence of the illative sense as an explanation of how an individual or a community arrives from a system of converging probabilities to a state of certainty, then he is vulnerable to the charge of empty explanation. He would in fact be explaining the way we arrive at certainty by merely saying that we have the potential to do it. But this is no explanation at all. It is just reiterating what we already know. Peirce's approach may be questioned because of his conviction that there is a world of facts available to everyone in a neutral way. Relatively recent work in the philosophy of science has produced compelling arguments and even historical evidence that such a view of science is at best naïve, at worst utterly mistaken (e.g. Hanson 1958; Kuhn 1962). No individual scientist or group of scientists can establish all the claims needed for the research engaged in. Scientific practice is not

5. For more on Peirce's views of a Church based on agapistic love, see Anderson 2004.

something that is linked to the bedrock of fact at every point. It is rather an activity associated with a fabric of interlocking, mutually supporting, knowledge-claims and hypotheses, a fabric within which we have the ineradicable roles of testimony and expertise, evident in questions like: Who is the real expert here? Who is to be trusted? On what grounds? In fact, what we nowadays call research programmes are units of scientific work made up of researchers who are meant to remain loyal to a set of core principles come what may (Collins & Evans 2007; Goldman 1999; Lakatos 1978).

The point of these quick objections to both Newman and Peirce is not that their contributions are now outmoded. It is rather to draw two modest conclusions. The first is that, although the structures of authority and decision making within the Church and within the scientific community differ in their formal aspects, they turn out to be somewhat similar when considered more realistically, in other words when their practical dimension is highlighted. The second conclusion deals more with the Church than with science. Newman and many other theologians after him who dealt with this issue rightly highlighted the role of the illative sense, especially in its collective dimension. The Church's system of doctrinal authority can slide into a situation in which coherence within the group is given priority over correspondence to the facts. Peirce reminds us that the scientific ideal, at least as he saw it, is to limit one's claims to what can be justified by correspondence to the facts. He thought that science has the upper edge because it limits itself to correspondence. Although somewhat naïve, this claim does indicate that the Church may profit from becoming more aware of the dangers associated with the coherence theory of truth. Of course, within the faith community, one can always resort to God, who, in His benevolence, will see to it that mutual agreement will lead to the truth. But even a faith community is obliged to do everything humanly possible to avoid an agreement that is nothing more than a convenient human construction. My basic suggestion therefore is that the Church should explore the role of 'correspondence

to the facts' within its decision-making processes. Of course, the facts in this context are not of the same kind as those we find in the sciences. For the Church's field of operation, it seems that facts can be expressed primarily in terms of the sensus fidelium, in terms of Revelation, in terms of Tradition, or in terms of the various possible combinations of these three factors.

How can we explore this aspect further? One way is to distinguish between dogmatic facts and particular religious facts. The former are taken to be elements of revealed truth that issue directly, in some clear sense, from the deposit of faith, while the latter are religiously significant states of affairs over which the Church does not enjoy infallibility. For instance, that the Second Vatican Council has the authority of an ecumenical council, is a dogmatic fact. On such a matter, and on others like it, the Magisterium has the competence to pronounce infallibly. As regards other facts, however, it does not. Particular religious facts, such as whether this particular marriage is valid or not, do not form part of the set of propositions for which the Church demands an act of faith. This distinction should not be taken as a clear dividing line. For further clarity, and responsible appreciation of the important nuances involved, this point should be explored in relation to the doctrine on the hierarchy of truths. What is essential for the inquiry presented in this paper is that the element or datum we can call a fact within the ecclesial context is one that demands absolute acceptance, or acceptance to a very high degree. Just as in science, a widely accepted experimental result is considered a datum that all future theories need to incorporate, so also in theology: a fact can be taken to be a datum that determines, in some clear sense, all possible future interpretations and all future developments of theological ideas and religious practices in that area.

Another possible way forward could be to consider theologically significant facts to be those widely accepted and genuinely justified sociological and anthropological empirical

descriptions that are relevant to the way Christian doctrine should be applied in a particular context so as to arrive at clear principles of action. Such facts are indeed nothing more than empirical ones derived from the methods of the natural and human sciences, but they gain theological significance because of their role within the process of moral reasoning. For instance, various biological details concerning the early human embryo are rightly considered facts that should determine the way fundamental Christian principles of bioethics are formulated. Some features of social, political, and economic reality are rightly considered facts that determine the role the Church should play in the global context. Notice for instance how Gaudium et Spes starts by presenting and analysing the human condition, and then proceeding with the theological and moral reflection on the role of Christian in such conditions (§§ 4-10). These reflections show that, even though the Church may be concerned more with how to live in the world than how to describe it, even though the Church may differ essentially from the scientific community in being more concerned with the political than with the theoretical, the role of facts within the managing of ecclesial agreement and disagreement is not thereby diminished.

As can be seen from these suggestions, determining what a fact is for the ecclesial context is a difficult task, and determining what correspondence to such a fact means is probably an even more difficult task. In this paper, I have supplied only very sketchy guidelines on how to make these determinations. There is still more work to be done. The only result I can claim is a very modest one, namely the awareness that the dynamism of inquiry within the Church and the functioning of its structure of doctrinal authority can

benefit considerably from a comparison with the dynamics of scientific inquiry, especially as regards the role of ecclesially-relevant facts within decision making.⁶

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6. Useful studies for further research include: Blackwell 1998a; Blackwell 1998b; Thomson 1987.

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