

Robert Bellarmine and Martin Chemnitz on the Antiquity of the Roman Canon

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I

If my friend, the *Dombibliothekar*, were to make a count of the books in the Hildesheim cathedral library to determine which work is represented by the most copies, the winner would surely be *On the Controversies of the Christian Faith against the Heretics of This Time* by Robert Bellarmine.¹ The Hildesheim holdings include part of the first edition from 1586–1593, and the editions of 1596 (Ingolstadt), 1599 (Venice), 1602–1604, 1608, 1610, 1620 (Paris), 1615 and 1619 (Cologne), and 1832–1840 (Rome). A souvenir of the theological wars four hundred years ago, the vast work was the chief source in which to find arguments for Catholic/Protestant disputes up to the First Vatican Council.

Recently, Bellarmine's discussion of the central prayer of the Latin mass, the Roman canon, has become useful for supplying the context for a Lutheran/Lutheran controversy about the authority of the canon tradition. Like Bellarmine, many Lutheran theologians have recently come to the position that because the tradition of the roman canon is old it is authoritative. Last year, for example, referring to the prayer as "the Great Thanksgiving" [eucharist], a group of Lutheran theologians in America expressed that position in a formal statement:

"...the many and various meanings of Holy Communion are given liturgical expression in the Great Thanksgiving, which is never omitted from the celebration."²

¹ *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus hujus temporis Haereticos*. 3 vols. Ingolstadt 1586–1593.

² Lutheran Forum XXIX 3 (1995) p. 23.

To use traditional Evangelical-Lutheran terminology, the group recognizes the eucharistic prayer as a *sedes doctrinae* — a reliable foundation for church doctrine. The statement is a sharp departure from the Reformation emphasis on scriptural authority alone — on *sola scriptura*.

The *Controversies* developed from lectures at the Jesuit college in Rome. But Bellarmine was highly aware of what had been said in Saxony — among other things, Martin Luther's teaching that only one part of the Roman canon can be accepted as *sedes doctrinae* — Jesus' biblical Words of Institution. "On them we must rest," he wrote, "on them we must build as on a firm rock if we would not be carried about with every wind of doctrine... For in these words nothing is omitted that pertains to the completeness, the use, and the blessing of the sacrament."³ Bellarmine was also highly aware of the critique of the canon carried on after Luther's death in Lower Saxony by Martin Chemnitz, Pastor of St. Martin's Church and Evangelical-Lutheran Superintendent in Braunschweig. In his *Examination of the Council of Trent*⁴ he argued that, aside from the Words of Institution, the Roman canon was not very old — and thus not authoritative. Bellarmine's *Controversies* challenged Chemnitz in the section *De antiquitate canonis*.⁵

The American Lutherans obviously disagree with Luther about the "completeness" inherent in the biblical accounts. Their statement, which formalizes the old observation: *lex orandi lex credendi*, immediately raises the question about which of the "many and various meanings" they are willing to recognize. Does "thanksgiving", for example, replace Luther's "testament" as the central interpretation of the sacrament? Are the subjects of the Great Thanksgiving, therefore, both Christ and thankful believers — so that communicants participate with Him (as members of the Body of Christ) in the event of Calvary? Acting for their own salvation? A further question is whether, once having expressed formal allegiance to the prayer, are they able to accept or reject any of the various meanings associated with the eucharistic prayer?

³ "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church". Luther's Works, American Edition Vol. 36, p. 37.

⁴ *Examen Concilii Tridentini 1565–1571*. I use the translation by Fred Kramer, *Examination of the Council of Trent*. St. Louis 1997 f. Vol. II, p. 510 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.* III, Caput XX, 564–565.



Bellarminus Vindicatus?

Abb. 1: Titelkupfer zu Vitus Erbermann, *Controversiarum Roberti Bellarmini...* Compendium. Würzburg 1661.

The specific wording of the prayer to which the Americans refer is, of course, not identical with the Latin canon Bellarmine defended. In the spirit of the Liturgical Movement, instead, they have in mind any prayer that follows its basic structure. The additional doctrinal complications that arise from pre-approving variable texts must, of course, be dealt with elsewhere.

II

A few years earlier, after the emperor had defeated the Protestants in the Smalcaldic war, the suffragan bishop of Mainz, Michael Helding, had maintained that the Latin liturgy had been written by the apostles. "I am certain of this, and can explain it with good grounds, that in the first apostolic church the true and holy body and the salutary blood of Christ in the eucharist had the name and also the action called 'mass' and that both the name and the action has been maintained in the church everywhere up until our time." He made the same claim for the Roman canon. "We know... that the canon has been preserved from the time of the apostles absolutely word for word (*gar nach alle wort*) and that all the words of the canon... are found in the books of those who lived and wrote a thousand years ago."⁶

By order of King Ferdinand, the emperor's brother, Helding's sermonic opinions were distributed with the imperial law of 1548, the "Augsburg Interim", as a concomitant text⁷, and given official authority by the provision that "... the canon in the mass shall be interpreted and explained approximately in the way the Mainz coadjutor bishop preached..."⁸ It follows that in 1548 apostolic authorship of the canon was a matter of imperial law.

But historical facts are not established by imperial fiat, and Helding's statements were met with Protestant scorn. In England, Bishop John Jewel wrote:

⁶ Von der Hailigsten Messe. Fünffzehn Predige zu Augspurg auff dem Richstag im Jar M.D.XLvij gepredigt. Durch Michaelen Bischoff zu Sidonien, Meintzischen Suffraganeen. Ingolstadt 1548, Cr.

⁷ Heribert Smolinsky, "Michael Helding". In: Erwin Iserloh [Ed.], *Katholische Theologen der Reformationszeit* 2. Münster 1985, p. 130.

⁸ Georg Pfeilschifter [Ed.], *Acta Reformationis Catholicae* V. Regensburg 1973, p. 242.

"The Bishop of Sidon [Helding was titular bishop of Sidon in Lebanon], in the late diet of the emperor holden at Augusta avouched openly that ye had your whole canon from the apostles of Christ, word by word, even as it is... written in your mass books... There is no toy so vain or so fabulous but ye are able by yur cunning to bring it lineally, either from Christ himself or from his apostles or from one or other of the ancient fathers."⁹

From Denmark, Petrus Palladius and Johann Machabeus objected.¹⁰ In Germany, Justus Jonas¹¹ and Bernard Ziegler¹² wrote against Helding. Matthias Flacius called attention to the historical record.

"Sidon maintained that the whole canon as now in use came from the apostles word for word, yet all the pontifical writers witness the contrary. In turn they... recount who invented which part of the canon, which part of the mass."¹³

The Council of Trent (1545–1563), soberer than Helding, took account of those writers.

"... the Catholic Church instituted, many years ago, the sacred Canon, so pure from every error, that nothing is contained therein which does not in the highest degree savour of a certain holiness and piety, and raise up unto God the minds of those that offer. For it is composed out of the very words of the lord, the traditions of the apostles, and the pious institutions also of the holy pontiffs."¹⁴

⁹ The Works of John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury. John Ayre [Ed.], Cambridge 1845–1850. Vol. III, p. 235, vol. IV, p. 109.

¹⁰ *Brevis Censura impiarum aliquot concionum illius Suffraganei*. Copenhagen 1548.

¹¹ *De Fictio Missae Sacrificio Argumenta erronea Sophistarum Pontificiorum, cum Refutationibus eorundem. Argumenta vera, firma & perspicua, contra Sacrificium Missae Papisticae*. Magdeburg 1550.

¹² *De Sacramento altaris seu Coena Dominica et Missa Disputatio et Capita Proposita*. s. l. 1548.

¹³ *De Sectis, Dissentionibus, Contradictionibus et Confusionibus doctrinae, religionis, scriptorum et doctorum Pontificorum Liber*. Magdeburg 1550, p. 109.

¹⁴ Session 22, September 17, 1562. Henricus Denziger. *Enchiridion Symbolorum* 942. The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent. Ed. J. Waterworth. Chicago 1848, p. 156.

Chemnitz called attention to the difference between the imperial and the conciliar claims:

“... the fourth Tridentine chapter does not dare simply to assert that the canon of the Mass was composed by Christ and the apostles, but says that the Catholic church instituted it.”¹⁵

But the delegates at Trent, nevertheless,

“... at once add that the canon is established from the very words of the Lord, from the traditions of the apostles, and from the institutions of pontiffs... lest it be thought to be only a human tradition.”

Arguing that, aside from the biblical words, the text was a human tradition, Chemnitz cites individual authors: “Qui pridie quam pateretur” was by Alexander I about 110; “Communicantes et memoriam venerantes” was by Siricius about 300, “Hanc igitur oblationem,” was by Leo I about 450; “dies nostros in tua pace,” and “quam oblationem” was by Gregory the Great about 590.

Bellarmino concedes post-apostolic additions: “‘dies nostros in tua pace’ was added by Gregory, and Leo I added ‘Sanctum sacrificium immaculatam hostiam’.” That information, however, meant that “the canon is older than Leo or Gregory, and had always been held in highest veneration; for otherwise why would the historians have noted so diligently that one or another word was added by Leo or Gregory, if the canon were recent and instituted by some private man called ‘scholasticus’?”

Quotations from the canon in historical documents demonstrate its antiquity — that its use predated the quotations. Word-by-word quotation in the *ordo romanus*, and partial quotation by Amalar, Hugo, Rupert, Innocent, and Alcuin demonstrate it was older than 800 A.D. It was also older than St. Augustine, since he mentions a prayer in his Tract 84, *Ad Johannem*. It is older than St. Ambrose, who in *De Sacramentis* quotes “Quam oblationem tu Deus in omnibus, quaesumus, benedictam, adscriptam, ratam, etc.,” “Qui pridie, quam pateretur, etc.,” “Unde et memores,” “supra quae propitio”.

¹⁵ Op. cit. p. 509.

To which Chemnitz replies that it does not follow: "Certain words of the canon are found among the ancients; therefore the whole papalist canon, as it is now found, has the most ancient fathers as authors."

It was older than the Vulgate text of the Bible, Bellarmine goes on, since the apostles are listed, but not in St. Jerome's order. And since the canon mentions martyrs, or men and women, but not confessors or virgins-not-martyrs, it arose in a time before the church customarily talked publicly about confessors.

III

Before a certain point, however, historical evidence fails. There is very little evidence for the existence of the canon in the early centuries. Blame the lack on the Roman police! During the period of persecutions the church's books were confiscated. Thus, there is no possibility of settling the question *de antiquitate canonis* on the basis of historical evidence. The age of the canon, its "historical structure", and thus its authority must be determined on other grounds. Did the Holy Spirit ensure a reliable liturgical development? Or, during a period of severe doctrinal difficulties, were there also deviations from the liturgical tradition of the apostles?

The two alternatives are clear: one takes sides with Bellarmine and the authority of the later canon text, or, with Chemnitz and Luther, the scripture alone. It is not a matter of demonstration, therefore, but of faith in the reliability of tradition.

"The documents of the apostolic period brought together in the New Testament give us no exhaustive picture of the liturgy of their time. Even when one takes into consideration that at that time there could not have been agendas, because the liturgical action was not yet uniformly fixed, the New Testament is silent about much about which we would like to know. A clear picture is first afforded us by the fourth century, from which the oldest liturgical formulae have been transmitted to us.

The decisive question which these facts confront us with is the following. Are the liturgies of the fourth century the direct development and organic unfolding of the rudiments given in the New

Testament, or is there a break between the two periods? Is there a continuity, or do we have to judge that the initial was falsified in a "Catholic" fashion?"¹⁶

For Bellarmine, the antiquity of the canon — and its apostolic origin are demonstrated by the very lack of evidence.

"It remains then, that the canon is older than all memory, *and from the apostles*, as much else, through the hand come down to us through tradition."

The same lack of evidence led Chemnitz, on the contrary, to the opposite conclusion: that the canon was relatively recent; he estimated its completion at about 600 A.D. He quotes Pope Gregory the Great (Book 7, Letter 63): "Scholasticus composed that prayer." The patcher-together of the canon, therefore, he concluded, lived at the time of Gregory, around A.D. 590 or a little before.

Most contemporary liturgical scholars probably would be sympathetic with Chemnitz statement about permissible variety in liturgical prayers:

"And our churches are unjustly condemned because in the celebration of the Lords Supper they, as did the ancients, freely use prayer formulas which are in harmony with the faith and because they accord with the nature of our times and make for the edification of the church."

But for many of the same scholars, the canon tradition, and its *structure* is, nevertheless, authoritative. Protestant scholars who dismiss Reformation concerns, arguing that recent progress in liturgical studies has rendered Luther obsolete, have not noticed that many of those who constitute the consensus are bound by conscience to the Decrees of Trent, and therefore to its position about the antiquity of the canon.

The American group is apparently sure that certain "meanings" developed in the course of history are authoritative. And like them, many other Protestants — against Luther and Chemnitz — are convinced that

¹⁶ Leiturgia. Handbuch des Evangelischen Gottesdienstes. Vol I, Kassel 1954, p. 6.

course of liturgical history in the early centuries was untroubled, and thus that the original and authoritative form of the communion liturgy can be established by beginning with the evidence of the fourth century and projecting what we know backwards.

In his dispute with Martin Chemnitz *De Antiquitate Canonis*, Robert Bellarmine is clearly winning.

von Werner Schreier

1. „Christliche Sekten und Kirche Christi“

„Wir sehen, wie der moderne Mensch hin- und herirrt von einem religiösen System zum andern. Den einen treibt es zur düsteren Schwermut der indischen Lebensweisheit Buddhas, den anderen zur überschäumenden Lebensbejahung Nietzsches. Der eine sucht im altgermanischen Wodankult das religiöse Schöne seiner Seele zu stillen, der andere in spiritistischen Sitzungen einer falschen Mystikismus der erstarrenden Kalte reiner Diesseitskultur zu entfliehen. Fragen wir nach der Ursache all dieser religiösen Irrgänge, dann erkennen wir, daß sie in den Zeitverhältnissen liegen.“¹

Das liest sich wie eine Beschreibung der postmodernen religiösen Landschaft, wenigstens auch angesichts der Zeitdiagnose, die der Autor vorlegt: eine Zeit der Gärung, des unruhigen Tastens und Suchens, eine vergnügungssüchtige Zeit, eine Zeit der Freiheit vom Dogmenzwang, eine Zeit, in der die Menschen das Geheimnisvolle und Mystische ebenso lieben wie die wissenschaftlich aussehende Methode.² Das Zitat stammt indessen aus dem Jahre 1925 aus der Feder Konrad Algermissens.³ Es ist seinem Buch „Christliche Sekten und Kirche Christi“ entnommen, das in überarbeiteter Fassung ab 1930 in etlichen Auflagen als die weit verbreitete und heute noch brauchbare „Konfessionskunde“ erschien.

Algermissens Interesse gilt besonders den „christlichen Sekten“. Er sieht, wie sie „ihre Propaganda immer mächtiger entfalten und die Men-

¹ Konrad Algermissen, *Christliche Sekten und Kirche Christi*, 2. und 3. neu bearbeitete und stark vermehrte Auflage, Hannover 1925, S. II.

² Ebd., S. 14–19.

³ Zu Konrad Algermissen vgl. den Artikel von Joop Bergsma, Algermissen, Konrad, in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Bd. 1, Freiburg, 3. Aufl. 1993, Sp. 393f.