

“My sheep hear my voice and I know them”
Reflections on language, tone, and teaching in the space between Magister and
Magisterium

(Paper presented for a panel at the Celebratory Conference for the 10th anniversary of the CCS, Durham University, April 19th 2018)

What does it mean to be taught by Christ? Genuinely to undergo being taught by him? So that any one of us could say, after reflective consideration “I have learned this or that from Christ”, or others could pick one, or several, of us out and say: “They are who they are because they have been taught by Christ”? Until quite recently it would have been assumed that there were a couple of more or less obvious answers to this question: “Well, we undergo being taught by Christ by reading the scriptures, hearing what Christ has to say and learning how to put that into practice”. Not a bad answer, for there are indeed to be found in the texts lapidary phrases and unforgettable stories, words which will last forever. However, it’s an answer that has become challenging to maintain as we have learned more about how ancient texts work, how easy it is to be fooled into ignoring that it is our own reflection that we see first in such texts, and how difficult it is to allow those texts to break through that reflection and to read us. In other words, any easy wholeheartedness in our reply is suspect, as reflecting naïve idealism, and perhaps the ideology of a group that is forming us, rather than lived discipleship.

Another answer might have been: “Well, we undergo being taught by Christ through submitting ourselves to the teaching of the Church, especially as conveyed to us by Bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome”. Again, not a bad answer, for without some sort of living, institutional interpretative mechanism we would be a religion of the book, and not the religion of Spirit and of Signs which we are. However, a number of factors, lived factors in the biographies of all of us, have made it challenging to give this answer in other

than a highly nuanced way, if, again, our reply is not to be suspect, as revealing naïve idealism, or a group's ideology, rather than lived discipleship.

Let me say that when I refer to lived factors in the biographies of all of us, I don't mean in the first place, particular teachings, on, for instance, contraception, matters gay, the death penalty, or ecological and financial issues, though each one of these may have served for some of us as a way in to what I am talking about. I mean that over the lifetime of, I guess, all of us here, *something other* than the official living interpretative mechanism, has taught us, and taught us truly, to become ever more aware of the persistent dishonesty, sanctified cowardice, corporate spirit, intellectual bankruptcy, moral opportunism, financial ineptness, sexual furtiveness, vacuous careerism and liturgical idiocy which sometimes seem to inhere in the clerical caste of our Church. In precisely the group which attributes to itself, at least in its upwardly-mobile members, the role of magisterium.

Please note, my aim here is not to bore or scandalize with criticisms of the clerical caste, some sort of member of which I am. My interest is elsewhere: I take for granted that none of those present can pretend, or want to pretend, to be members of some putative "simple faithful". That if we are here in Durham for this celebration today, it is because we have not allowed ourselves to be scandalized by the manifest non-credible-ness of our set-up, but are aware of *something more than, or other than*, our shared structured mess, as at work in keeping the Gospel alive in our midst, and in enabling us to be taught by Jesus. Moreover, we are aware that this "something more than" is in some sense of Christ and from Christ and is not diminished by the obvious diminishment of those whose claim to stand for him has come to ring so hollow.

I consider then, that to be able to bring out, explicate, and explore with tentative rationality, how we really have been taught, and are in fact being taught by Christ in the midst of all this is part of a positive exercise in sharing our

responsibility for transmitting the Gospel in and as Church. In short, I want to bring into sharper relief something to which Vatican II pointed, but to which we haven't yet given as much attention as we might.

In its tenth paragraph, *Dei Verbum* famously says:

“Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (see Acts 2, 42, Greek text), so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort.

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. *This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it*, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is the last sentence of this to which I wish to pay heed. For there is in it an initial reference to something which cannot be contained, before the authors move on to expounding how they consider themselves to be the officially trustworthy servants of that uncontainable. That reference to the uncontainable may have been a rhetorical salute, alluding to the traditional protestant criticism of Catholic teaching authority as in some way usurping the place of the word of God. But it is certainly not *merely* a rhetorical salute, and it does leave something to be fleshed out which, to my awareness, has not been fleshed out. Or at least has not been fleshed out with anything like the same detail, not to say canonical obsessiveness and self-referential emphasis, that the rest of the paragraph that surrounds it has been subjected to.

Of course, the word of God to which the paragraph refers, is the written or handed on word of God. That is to say, only by analogy the word of God. For the Word of God, *simpliciter*, is the crucified and risen Jesus. And it is curious that the authors of the document, in referring to themselves as the living teaching office of the Church, exercising authority in the name of Jesus, talk as

though the living presence of the Word of God, *simpliciter*, were specifically associated with them as the real interpreters of written or spoken words which are somehow more than they.

All of that fits well enough within a cultural world whose assumptions about human rationality were buttressed by generations of what we might call, with a grateful hat-tip to Fergus Kerr, cartesian Thomism. The assumption was that the baptized faithful might have a certain knowledge of the faith, but that owing to original sin, from which we have been forgiven, but whose effects are still rampantly alive within us, we are unlikely to be able to achieve truth and understanding – clear knowledge – above all in matters where fleshly passions render humans extremely prone to self-deception. However, luckily, rather as God delivers certainty to the Cartesian mind, despite its dependence on a body whose deliverances would always tend to the dubious, so “Church Authority” exercises the role of official recipient of divine certainty and rationality, as the stand in for Christ the head of the body. While the rest of us are the more or less passion-prone body, who can be rendered docile by obedience to the deliverances of the rational ecclesiastical mind.

Well, fairly obviously, it is this whole culturally dated way of understanding deliverances of truth in the midst of self-deceptive humanity that has collapsed across our culture over the last century. The picture of rationality, I insist, rather than any of the theological truths that it thought it was sustaining. For those who enjoy irony, it would seem that while the body of the Church has, by and large got on with discipleship, learning with difficulty and no little humility about the objective nature of human subjectivity, at relative peace with our corporal mutability, the head has scarcely begun to perceive how subjective is its objectivity, how self-flattering; let alone how prone have been some of its

clear and distinct deliverances to all the self-deception of an original sin to which it appears to think itself immune.

Part of what the rest of us have learned, of course, is that relationality is prior to rationality, as both social science and neuroscience attest. It is as relational beings that we become rational, and that according to the quality of our relationality, so will be our rationality. From this perspective it becomes apparent that there is something tremendously defensive and frightened about insisting that mind is prior to desire. And fear and defensiveness have never been true allies of faith and truthfulness.

So, how are we going to reimagine what it means to be taught by Christ? As you can tell, I'm only just getting into this project, and am unsure where it will take me. Nevertheless, when it comes to the question of the relationship between the Living Word of God, the *Magister*, those who commend themselves to us as the *Magisterium*, and the rest of us, then let us remember that what we are in search of is a renewed Catholic interpretation of these lines:

...You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all siblings. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called guides or instructors, for you have one guide, the Christ¹.

I take it that these three negative instructions function as a negative theology of teaching. Long before we can begin to say anything positive about Christ teaching us, we are severely warned about three tones of voice, the which, if we either use them ourselves in our teaching, or hear them in others who claim to be teaching us, automatically exclude that which is being delivered as of Christ. And the three tones of voice are all symptoms of certain relationships within the cultural matrix we normally refer to as “religious”. So, whatever authorized

¹ Matt. 23:8-10

religious specialists there are among us, the teaching Christ does not sound like one of them. All biological and cultural forms of paternity are more likely to mislead us about, than to point us towards, God our Father. God's voice never sounds like that formed from within cultural paternity. Finally, any voice purporting to be from a guide or instructor, someone who has got their act together and so can lead others, is a siren voice of fake goodness and deluded self-mastery and is not the voice of the Christ who genuinely leads us on. This has been easier for us to remember since John Paul II's catastrophic 1994 commendation of Marcial Maciel Degollado as an "efficacious guide for youth". That was the word *guide* in exactly the sense forbidden for the Greek *καθηγητής* in St Matthew's Gospel. Maciel, some may remember, was a serial abuser of minors over decades, including several of his own children by three different "wives". But also, the most successful fundraiser in the history of the Church and the founder of the Legionaries of Christ.

The oddest, and apparently the most difficult of these negative instructions to receive seems to be the one about fathers. There is a crypto-bitheism by which we imagine the Father as a centre of consciousness, and therefore of recognisably paternal attitudes and tones of his own, who has set up a created order which the Son, another centre of consciousness with a more filial set of attitudes, then comes into in order to sort out some sort of offensive mess. In this way we render null one of the most extraordinary things about the New Testament, which is that there is no paternal teaching voice in it. The only times there is a "voice from heaven", a *bath-qol*, it has as its purpose to transfer all representative power to the Son, with words to the effect of "this is my fully empowered equal: listen to him". So that there is no longer any divine paternal teaching. Teaching *about* the Father, yes, but not teaching *from* the Father. All teaching is done at the level of an equal among equals. And tends to create equality among equals.

This, I suspect, is the impact also of the famous phrases in Matthew's Gospel "You have heard...but I say to you". In each case the relevant oracle has its apparent cultural paternity relativized, and a teaching that works at the level of reciprocal sibling desire is substituted for it. It is also part of the impact of the first phrase of the well-known hymn from Philippians, where we are told to have among ourselves the mind of Christ who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. It has taken me a long time to begin to suspect that the "grasping" is not to be taken as opposed to "letting go" ("he had been grasping on to equality with God, but suddenly let go, as one might let go an upper railing of a particularly high skyscraper, and so fell to earth as a human"); rather the grasping refers to "holding onto equality with God for himself exclusively", as opposed to willingly undergoing everything necessary to make of that equality with God something in which we might be invited to share.

I apologise for having so little advanced with this thought project – that of attempting to begin to provide some regular criteria for discernment for what it is actually like to undergo being taught by Christ. My hope eventually is that we be able to describe with confidence where we actually have learnt from Christ; that we be able to protect ourselves from those whose tone and language make it quite clear that their teaching is not from Christ; and that we find an appropriate way to describe and to live the relationship between the living word of God, the *Magister*, in our midst and the different gifts and commissions of entirely equal siblings in the Body. In this way, whatever the term "*magisterium*" might turn out to mean within a quite different understanding of rationality, it will be evident that it has a proper role as a sign of how the one Teacher is present in our building each other up for that dizzy equality.

For the moment, I leave you with a thought. There is something slightly counterintuitive about the quote from John 10, 27 which is my title. I would expect the phrase to have been: “my sheep hear my voice and they know me” – or “they recognise me”. But in fact, Jesus says “my sheep hear my voice *and I know them*, and they follow me”. It would seem that part of what is recognisable in his tone of voice is that it communicates knowing them, such that they are able to pick up from his tone of voice that they are known. In fact, there seems to be an interpenetrative quality, such that it is in our being known that we come to know him, and maybe this is the inseparable beginning to any answer about what it looks like to be taught by Christ: any genuine following comes from within a sense of being known. A sense of safety, freedom, and enhanced whole-heartedness is the immediate correlate to the Voice.

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