

'FIRST THINGS' as encouraging & frightening

The Ecumenical Misunderstanding of John 17:21

Being in Athens the day the Pope was (5.4.01, 1st papal visit in more than a millenium), & experiencing some of the preparational hubbub the previous day, I was not surprised when the evening news, in a self-congratulatory context, referred to him as an "enemy" (ἐχθρός *echthros*). Said the television reporter, "We are taught to love our enemies, & today we proved we do so in the way we treated the Pope." Personally, this Pope is nobody's enemy; 1st ever to enter a synagogue & a mosque, & 1st since the AD1054 split to enter an Orthodox church. But he represents a power the Christian East experienced as murderously oppressive, especially during the Crusades (esp. the AD1209 crushing of Constantinople [Istanbul]), which was so weakened that it didn't recover enough to prevent its AD1453 take-over by the Muslims). On Pope day, police sealed off the central city, aware of widespread public anger over the government's entertainment of this "enemy."

Pope day minus one, I took hold of the carpet the workmen were laying at the foot of Mars Hill for the Pope's Mars Hill speech (which was ecumenical in repenting of the Christian West's sins against the Christian East), parallel to St. Paul's Mars Hill speech (Ac.17.22-31, which was ecumenical as a message from the "Lord of heaven and earth" for "the whole world," the Athenians' religiousness being one instance of God's creating all to "look for him"--though, I think, Luke was composing the speech, in the manner of ancient historians, from his personal perspective as a companion-traveler with Paul, how much verbatim being unknown).

This Thinksheet is about my own unease vis-a-vis the Pope/Rome, parallel to the Greeks' unease in Athens earlier this month. Not just Rome: I'm uneasy, on the basis of wide & deep historical observation, about the handles Christians (or any other humans) give the devil when they *clump together for clout*. Dilemma: without consolidation a movement disappears as does water running onto sand with no channel; & with consolidation a movement becomes a self-interested, self-promotive, self-protective institution, enemy as well as friend of the movement which gave it birth. Friend, because it gives a movement de-finiteness, boundaries-consciousness, intellectual coherence; enemy, because doctrine rigidifies into dogma & heresy-hunting, coercion gains on persuasion as means to unity, & growing worldly powers (wealth, numbers, education, management skills) activate original sin to corrupt the institution: world's corruption floods the church, then church's corruption controls the world.

In Athens those days I had fellow-feelings about Rome's corrupt control of worldly powers: the Greeks, & we Protestants, have painful memories that keep us wary, even fearful, of Rome, though we need no longer dread Rome's teeth, physical power to cause us suffering. Yes, this Thinksheet is about that unease in my heart. I must tell you why.

1 Rome abuses Scripture in the interest of its power. Here I'll give just three instances:

(1) Rome misreads Jn.17.21--e.g., in the encyclical "Ut Unum Sint"--to mean the Roman primacy, the Pope as "first among [episcopal] equals." The Papacy has always grabbed as much worldly power as the world would permit, its kingdom as much "of this world" as its powers could secure--the reverse of a text in the same Gospel as "ut unum sint" (Lat., "that they may all be one" [Jn.17.21]): 18.36 [TEV] specifically disavows worldly power: "My kingdom does not belong to this world....No, my kingdom does not belong here!" Further, in 17.21 the kind of "one"ness is specified as not perceptible (as in an institution) but mysterious: "I pray that they may all be one, Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. [Now comes what is perceptible--a loving, mutually supportive bond, as in the pagans' saying "See how the Christians love one another!"] May they be one,*so that the world will believe that you sent me." The next two vv. spell out this mystery, concluding on the love note: "in order that the world may know that...you love them as you love me."

* Ambivalence in Jn.'s letters (1-3 Jn.): Having the Lord's commandments & being given the Spirit, the born-again don't need human teachers (1Jn.2.27), don't sin (5.18), & even can't sin (3.9): the Faith is primarily a movement. But enough organization is needed to maintain clarity of self-definition & "authority" against doctrinal & behavioral deviants in the Christian community (as, properly, the Vatican's 9.14.00 "Dominus Jesus" does vis-a-vis syncretism--though marred by the hubris of primacy in the one true church). * 3Jn.9 (NRSV; better translation, "pay attention to" "the elder").

Elliott
△
Thinksheets

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville, MA 02632
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 520 per year
e-mail wandlejelliott@mediasone.net

Noncommercial
reproduction
permitted

5.28.01

3060

While the primacy-claim abuse is limited to Rome, the underlying abuse characterizes the ecumenical movement in general. I've participated in that (conciliar, transdenominational) movement at all levels (World, National, state, area, local councils of churches): all levels have taught that evangelism would go better if we were to "heal our divisions," as though the world cares one way or the other. For itself, the world cares about power: for us, it cares only about love, whether our love for one another & for "the [human, suffering] world" is real & effectual. Furthermore, when we get together to form ecumenical institutions, by our folly & scandal we sometimes make evangelism more *difficult* (e.g., as when the World Council of Churches gave \$88,000 to a terrorist organization in black Africa).

(2) To conform to its new "culture of life" doctrine (based on this Pope's PhD view of the person, developed chiefly on the basis of German personalism), Rome now (in the Pope's THE GOSPEL OF LIFE) reverses the force of "image" of God in humanity: the text commands the death penalty, the Pope abuses the text to teach *no* death penalty: the Pope's "the culture of life" trumps the Bible. Where? Gn.9.6.

(3) One more Rome-manipulated text: Ex.20.13; Deut.5.17 (both NRSV): "You shall not murder." Rome's polemic against abortion uses the Decalog for absolute condemnation of abortion (& even, some radicals have it, nonrhythm contraception!) as "murder." The fact that this exegesis is unhistorical & novel to "the culture of life"--& thus a simple case of hermeneutical special pleading--does not seem to worry these "pro-life" Catholic intellectuals & ecclesiarchs. It would be impolite to expose the trick by asking why "the culture of life" does not apply this absolutism to war: if war is murder, would not the twisted logic of absolutely no abortion because murder lead Rome to absolute pacifism? You'll have a long wait if you expect Rome to follow its own logic.

2 Now reread, please, this Thinksheet's 1st line. I devour every issue of Dick Neuhaus' FIRST THINGS: it's high level of intellection encourages me to think that the Christian faith in America today is not without competent defenders of the faith & critics of its competitors (esp. secularistic humanism, which works to confine religion to private life, away from "the public square" of economics, politics, education, & the media). But I find this periodical also frightening: I wouldn't want Neuhaus' "naked public square" clothed with his (& Rome's) take on the Christian religion, a take I think regressive & oppressive.

On the worry side, let's look at a few items in the June-July/01 issue:

1 Carson Holloway (24-28) struggles for a reason why pro-lifers should not use violence to prevent the "**murder**" of the unborn, who are "human person[s]," not just human beings parallel with other beings (I add Jas.3.7, which uses "being" [or kind or genus] for both). "The culture of life" has tangled itself in its own neologism: upgrading the preborn to the status of "person" semantically traps the Pope & his followers into upgrading abortion to "murder"--so shouldn't we do anything possible to stop murderers, even killing them if necessary? I find this logic internally convincing, & **frightening** not just because of pro-lifers' temptation to direct violence but because of the consequent political pressure on government to engage in indirect force (1) actively, in prosecuting abortionists & (2) passively, in (in effect) forcing pregnant to bear by making safe abortion unavailable to them, unavailable especially to the poor.

2 Neuhaus (67-74), supporting the pro-life movement's goal of "every unborn child protected in law and welcomed in life," is in the "**murder**" semantic self-trap. In his SACRED CHOICES: The Right to Contraception and Abortion in Ten World Religions, another Roman Catholic theologian, Dan.C.Maguire, is not in that trap, nor are the ten religions, all affirming the right to family planning, including contraception & necessary abortion (Fortress Press/01). Macguire realistically faces the rising horrors of overpopulation & exposes the self-imprisoned, tortuous, utopian thinking of the no-choicers. But Neuhaus is certain that "the culture of life will finally prevail." His absolutism is **frightening**: "the culture of life" is a triumphalistic phrase "redolent with prophetic promise, crucifixion, resurrection, and the coming Kingdom of God." His anti-abortion politics, pressing government to decide for the pregnant, is an offense against personal freedom & is a vote for the nanny state.