

A half-century after *Ecclesiam suam* and 'The 1964 Instruction': the practice of the historical disciplines within the practice of theology

Thomas O'Loughlin

Anyone who studied theology in the decade or so after Vatican II will recall, with either a sense of deliverance or annoyance, some moment when a teacher pointed out that Vatican II had been the great 'game changer' in our approach to a particular topic. Whether one applauds this or seeks to minimise it by an appeal to a 'hermeneutic of continuity,' it is a fact that Vatican II was seen as marking a watershed in the way that Catholic theologians went about their business. And the fact that some today need to make appeal to a so-called 'hermeneutic of continuity' is an indirect recognition that in a short period of time a new way of doing theology emerged which was distinctive from the forms of neo-scholastic investigation that had been dominant.¹ Two aspects of that shift in theological style can be easily observed. First, a new approach to the use of scriptural texts that were now increasingly being read in terms of what they might have meant at the time of their composition or in critical dialogue with the contemporary reader, rather than as proof-texts for dogmatic conclusions or as a ramshackle container of set of propositions in need of learned extraction for use within the systematic edifice. The definition-driven strictures of the Pontifical Biblical Commission became a thing of the past, while Catholics involved in biblical studies began to engage openly with non-Catholic scholarship on common

¹ See the survey of neo-scholasticism in F. Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (London 2007), 1-16.

ground.² Second, there was a new openness to modern sources of human knowledge as a genuine and valuable resource in theology. Whether it was other ways of doing philosophy than scholasticism, the social or psychological sciences, or whatever, there was a growing awareness that theology did not stand as a controlling monarch, the *regina scientiarum omnium*, but as an endeavour that needed to be in creative and critical dialogue with all endeavours to know.

One could write a history of Christian theology as the alternation between Clement of Alexandria's openness to human knowing, his image of the wise Christian as like the bee gathering nectar from every flower, and the exclusiveness inherent in Ambrose of Milan's dictum that it was not in dialectic, a synecdoche for all that human reason might discover, that God was pleased to save his people. Within such an alternating perspective, the early 1960s marked a definite and deliberate shift towards Clement's position; while the rejection of isolationist obscurantism, characteristics of Ambrose's approach, was seen as part of the *aggiornamento* that was an implicit theme in the Council.

A common dimension in both of those changes in the style of Catholic theology was a new attitude to history, which was no longer conceived not as the narrative of the past justifying the present, but as a critical discipline pursued with the aim of finding out what happened in the past and as a lantern to the intricate, perhaps tortuous, paths of earlier times. That there was an 'historical turn' in biblical studies is readily grasped

² The early decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which were considered to have continuous binding authority, can be found in the *Enchiridion Biblicum*:

Documenta Ecclesiastica Sacram Scripturam Spectantia (Rome 1954).

for it was obvious by the later 1960s that Catholic scholars had embraced what is usually described, using an inaccurate portmanteau term, as ‘the historical critical method.’³ However, it is not so obvious that theology more generally had also taken this turn. But the new agenda of dialogue inevitably produced a need to engage in a fresh way with the history of theology and Christian history more generally. Any investigation involving a historically shaped reality, such as the Catholic Church, must consider the paths from the past to the present if those who are undertaking the enquiry claim that they wish to engage fruitfully with those who have, over time, come to disagree with them – while at the same time acknowledging the continuities from the past into the present. This can be seen in the fact that if a dialogue is to take place with other churches, one must try to establish what is the source of the division, how it came about, there must be a critical discernment of the issues involved seen more clearly in hindsight, and an investigation of the legacies, often unintended, of the past to present. Only critical historical awareness allows us to grip such questions. Likewise, if one assumes that the Church is on a journey through time – a central image in many documents of the Council - where the past and the future are as, if not more, important than the experienced reality of ‘now,’ then one cannot investigate its identity without also investigating its history.

This interest in history was, of course, not new: with its continual interest in its tradition – at every liturgy it reads its ancient texts and rekindles its memory –

³ It is not a ‘method’ as if it were a fixed and defined procedure, but the willingness to adopt a variety of investigative tools, each suited to the particular type of evidence, which have emerged in the critical examination of evidence, either past or present and both textual and non-textual, over the last two hundred years.

Christianity has been called a ‘religion of historians.’⁴ However, if Christianity since the time of the evangelists has been engaged the cultivation of community memory,⁵ one of the distinctive features of modernity – history is a relatively new academic discipline – has been the mode of that engagement. Critical history is a part of modernity, its investigative basis is, given the contingency of human actions, radically empirical, and it is this mind-set that forms part of the human condition with which Christians today cannot but engage.⁶ For contemporary Christians to turn away from critical history – and there is no shortage of such Siren voices – is, given our relationship to the past as our tradition, tantamount to fundamentalism be it based in some perfect text (which could be the Bible, or Denzinger, or a catechism) or perfect moment (be that ‘the apostolic times,’ the ‘time of the Fathers’ or some other mythically constructed classical moment). But if critical history is part of our toolkit for approaching human endeavours over time, it has a more significant role when we seek to dialogue because critical dialogue is implicitly self-critical: I might have gone along a wrong way in the past, I might have ‘got the wrong end of the stick,’ and I may have been limited in my perspective. Once one enters such dialogues as those proposed around the time of Vatican II, in documents such as *Ecclesiam suam*,⁷ one is virtually condemned to self-examination of one’s past and the factors that have

⁴ M. Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (ET by P. Putnam, Manchester 1992), 4.

⁵ See T. O’Loughlin, ‘*Huperetai ... tou logou*: Does Luke 1:2 Throw Light onto the Book Practices of the Late First-Century Churches?’ in H.A.G. Houghton ed., *Early Readers, Scholars and Editors of the New Testament* (Piscataway, NJ 2014), 1-15.

⁶ E.L. Krusevac, ‘Questing for the Historical Jesus: Need We Continue?’ *Doctrine and Life* 51(2001)590-604.

⁷ The text used is that on the Vatican website.

brought one to this moment with such a specific inheritance. On encountering such questions, one needs to involve historians.

Outside of biblical studies, few at the time commented on this new relationship to historical enquiries, but that it happened cannot be doubted. One can clearly see this change, to historical enquiry in general and to a more historically aware use of the scriptures more particularly, in those scholars who had the energy to produce both ‘pre’ and ‘post’ conciliar versions of their key works. If, to take just a single example, one compares the two works of Michael Schmaus (1897-1993) on dogmatics one sees this very clearly. His earlier work *Katholische Dogmatik* (its first volume was published in 1938 and its sixth and final volume in 1961) is a synthesis, conservative even for its time, of an approach that saw dogmatics as a complex, well-nigh self-contained perfect structure: each part checked and tested, fitted into its correct place, and capable of functioning as a system for generating ever more information about itself – the dogmatic definitions of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption being pristine examples of the productivity of this ever more perfect edifice.⁸ A study of the biblical texts is peripheral to the overall enterprise. When they are used there is an explicit assumption that they will be in agreement with the dogmatic positions taken, and exegesis takes the form of a mutual illumination of texts – with systematics having the priority – and the historical dimension is confined within a notion of ‘development’ whereby the later and the earlier are harmonized to each other. There is an historical dimension to the work, but it is confined to supplying explanatory context: the notion that it could produce a real doubt about the conclusions is not

⁸ His fifth volume, focussed on mariology – a work of the late 1950s – being the most egregious example of this tendency.

entertained. The contingencies of history are analogous to ‘noise’ within the system. Within a few years of completing the work on which he worked for more than two decades, Schmaus produced a new multi-volume work, *Dogma*, which was designed to capture the new spirit of theology after the Council and which became a standard textbook in Catholic institutions of the next two decades. The new relationship to history is visible in the preface to its first volume from 1968:

... the mind of modern man works with different concepts, images, and attitudes – with another understanding of being and different feeling for life – from that which characterised earlier ages. As a result, certain ideas which formerly were self-evident and seemed important and significant are now either inaccessible or hardly accessible to the contemporary mind
God’s word, which we make our own through faith, is always expressed in a particular form at a particular time, though its inner core never changes.⁹

The clear acknowledgement of the historicity of the theological endeavour, and so the need for the historical disciplines to engage with it, is, however, immediately balanced with the caution:

Taking the situation of the times into account does not mean subordinating the Christian faith to the wishes and demands of the present. It simply means presenting the faith within those horizons and perspectives in which our age is running its course.

⁹ *Dogma I: God in Revelation* (London 1968); on p. xi, Schmaus stresses its newness: ‘To avoid any misunderstanding, I would like to stress that this work is not at all a summary or revision of my older German text (*Katholische Dogmatik*), but a completely new treatment of theology based on the developments which have taken place as a result of the Second Vatican Council.’

It is as if he recalled with a shudder the linkage made in neo-scholastic textbooks between ‘historicism,’ ‘relativism,’ and the denial of revelation – a notion that led to the *de facto* position that while heresy had a history, true doctrine merely had phases more akin to natural processes such as the sequence of acorn to oak rather than it being seen as affected by human ups and downs. Once we get into the volumes it is clear that Schmaus was attempting to engage with history: each section begins with a summary of the scriptures and then sees the modern situation as the result of historical processes. So, for example, his treatment of atheism begins with ‘Atheism in the Old Testament,’ then ‘Atheism in the New Testament,’ and moves on to ‘Atheism in Modern Times’ noting, *inter alia*, the positions of Kant, Laplace, Feuerbach, and Sartre who views are placed within an historical sequence.¹⁰ One might wonder what could be said that is of value in such a short compass about 3000 years of thought or whether any one person could address such a range of material, but such hesitations miss the point: Schmaus, a man who spent his life producing syntheses, had now produced a textbook which supposed that historical skill was part of the theologian’s kit. In a nutshell: proper training in historical skills would be as necessary for the theologian as philosophical training had been within scholasticism.

But where do we find the basis for this historical turn? One might argue that it began in the work of the Bollandists in Brussels, that of the historians of medieval thought from Denifle and Grabmann onwards, the Benedictine editors of the Vulgate, or the recovery of the Fathers with the *Nouvelle Théologie* of writers such as De Lubac. However, while it is possible to trace it to all these, and other, sources, the nearest we come to the place of history being ‘recognised’ by the ecclesial *magisterium* – and so

¹⁰ *Dogma 1*, pp. 70-91.

coming to be seen as mainstream rather than *recherché* – comes in two documents from 1964: the instruction *Sancta mater ecclesia* (which has passed into history with the simple title ‘the 1964 Instruction’ [hereafter ‘the Instruction’])¹¹ of 21 April and Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* [hereafter ‘*ES*’] of 6 August. However, at this point an immediate question must arise for the reader: how can these two works – one expressly addressed to the study of the gospels and the other an introductory letter from the beginning of a pope’s pontificate be seen as addressing the question of the place of history in theology?

The Instruction and history

When I began studying scripture in 1977 the Instruction was thirteen years old, but was still considered so important that it was invoked in lecture after lecture as the *magna carta* of what several of my teachers were doing. Catholics could now openly use, albeit with great care and with constant concern that they would not offend ‘the simple faithful,’ the methods of ‘the historical-critical method’ which itself was seen as some almost wondrous and strange invention on a par with nuclear energy or astrophysics as a creature expressive of modernity. I qualified that statement by saying that they could use it ‘openly’ for many had long realised that this ‘method’ was essential to a proper and intellectually satisfactory way of understanding of ancient texts and that its rejection implied some of the flawed assumptions of biblical fundamentalism, and therefore had produced ‘work-arounds’ by which they used the method but ‘withheld assent’ and thereby were preserved from Vatican censures. The most common such deceit was in studies of Isaiah where faced with the canonical

¹¹ I am using the ET by J.A. Fitzmyer from *Theological Studies* 25(1964)402-8.

obligation to assert that it was a single document by a single individual named Isaiah, scholars studying it as a redaction of three distinct texts explained that they were doing this merely to forewarn their readers as to what those others, not blessed with an appreciation of the *magisterium*, were tendentiously saying. But then came the Instruction and it was akin to liberation from a totalitarian tyranny: exegetes could use the tools of modern biblical scholarship, engage with non-Catholic scholars without having to make allowances or have allowances made for them, and most importantly, given that the trickle of new discoveries going back to the late-nineteenth century had become a flood with the almost simultaneous discoveries of in Qumran and Nag Hammadi, engage properly with new bodies of evidence. While the Instruction was formally addressed only to the issue of the gospels, given that these could now be read as documents produced within the historical situation of the early churches whose distinctive formation could be seen as resulting from processes accessible to historians, then historical studies must, *a fortiori*, be applicable not only to the scriptures as a whole, but to the history of Israel (and so of the Ancient Near East), and of the place of the early Christian communities in the Mediterranean world and the formation of the beliefs of those churches. And in so far as the practices and beliefs of the early churches were seen as existing within the contingencies of history, the doctrinal assumptions about the ‘apostolic period’¹² and the necessity to lay out a

¹² See T. O’Loughlin, ‘Divisions in Christianity: The Contribution of “Appeals to Antiquity”’ in S. Oliver, K. Kilby, and T. O’Loughlin eds, *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology and Philosophy in Honour of Fergus Kerr OP* (London 2012), 221-41.

priori a notion of development ceased to be the trademarks of mainline Catholic scholarship.¹³

What is most curious, from our vantage point, about this euphoria of the later 1960s and 70s regarding this ‘method’ is that they were so many scholars were so amazed. What was being proposed was not some fad of ‘the swinging sixties,’ but some ground rules of research that other scholarly discourses took for granted. I experienced this myself as a student. Having come from a degree in medieval history where every document was seen as being a witness, in the first place, to its time and location of composition, where one assumed that context reveals contours in a document, and that human language has a far richer texture than that of enunciating propositions to which a truth-table could be applied, I wondered what all the fuss was about when I first attended a course of lectures the scriptures where these commonplaces were extolled as radical and daringly modern. In short, the ‘method’ was little more than the standard tools that had emerged in the study of history and ancient texts over the period of well over a century. Indeed, the first scholars to apply the methods – for it is a collection of analytic tools rather than a single complex – to religious texts had indeed been the Bollandists. Having evolved what was to all intents the method we call ‘form criticism’ they quickly added that while this might appear to be applicable to the gospels, they knew that the gospels were ‘unique.’¹⁴ By

¹³ See J.-H. Walgrave, *Newman the Theologian* (ET by A.V. Littledale, London 1960) which is an extended essay to lay out a theory of dogmatic development such that one could then study the history of doctrines.

¹⁴ See the work of Hippolyte Delehaye whose great work, *Les légendes hagiographiques*, appeared in French in 1905 at the time of great fears over

1964 there was nothing mysterious or unusual about these methods within most branches of scholarship, what was new was an official recognition that these could form part of theological endeavour.

Latent within this acceptance were two other acknowledgements. The first concerns the investigators: the Instruction appreciated that one cannot stop being a curious human being – with the curiosity that is part of one’s own culture – when one studies theological texts. What constitutes human curiosity, the questions we seek to answer, is itself a product of history and culture: it is not a given in the way that older theology thought of Aristotle’s ‘all humans naturally desire to know’ as a *datum*. Historical curiosity – as it has emerged since the Renaissance – is as specific to our culture as that culture is itself specific, but equally, I as a human being within that culture have questions that need answers within the curiosity of that culture which, if my scholarship is authentic, I must pursue. And a key element of modern western culture is that historical explanation is perceived as more authentic – in human affairs – than any other kind of investigation.¹⁵ An historical investigation is seen as shedding light on the obscure, revealing the cover-ups of the past, and setting the record straight.

Conversely, it has become commonplace for some religious writers to suggest that this form of investigation should not be accorded any special place in theological

‘modernism’; see the introduction, pp. v-xxi, by T. O’Loughlin to the 1998 reprinting of *The Legends of the Saints* (Dublin 1998) for the relationship of Delehaye’s work and research on the scriptures.

¹⁵ This is the key point made by Krasevac (2001).

studies, or, more disingenuously, that that in ‘a post-modern environment’ one need not engage with its rigours. Rather than debate this point I would merely point to the number of investigations of past conduct – of clergy, politicians, media stars – that are part of our daily news: this method of uncovering what we refer to as ‘the truth’ is as deep within our culture as ever – and theologians ignore this quest at the risk of irrelevance.¹⁶

The second acknowledgement implicit in the Instruction concerns the nature of theological investigation: it assumes that empirical research – for that is a fundamental aspect of historical research – can be conducive to theological understanding. This may seem so obvious that it does not need to be stated – did not Augustine state that in some minor matters empirical research might throw light on obscure biblical passages¹⁷ – but what is implied in the notion that one can come to a deeper theological understanding through the use of historical investigation marks a watershed between us and Catholic theology prior to the 1960s. If one can now learn more, then it invokes the possibility that what one knew at an earlier time was incomplete and possibly defective. And if that is the case, then deductions made at

¹⁶ As I write there are in the media accusations of a massive cover-up of child abuse in the north of England just a few decades ago, of chemical attacks in Syria and a range of US counter-attacks, and of the burial without any marker of babies born in a convent nursing home in Galway in Ireland in the period before c.1960: in all three cases there are calls for ‘proper’ or ‘public investigations’ which will apply critical rules of evidence to the affairs – these methods and those of ‘the historical critical method’ are essentially the same.

¹⁷ *De doctrina christiana* 2,28,42-2,29,46.

that time may also be incomplete or even simply wrong. But that would mean that the Church was actually learning, obtaining new insights, coming closer to the truth – and this might mean that it might have to admit that it had been wrong due to ignorance or, at least, acknowledge that possibility. This is precisely the fearful vista that those in the nineteenth century who made tentative sorties into historical theology, such as J.H. Newman, had sought to guard against by developing a ‘doctrine of theological development’ where it was an assumption that the later state of knowledge could never contradict the earlier one. Like the development of the photographic plate, all that gradually emerged was what was there from the moment when it was exposed within the camera. One knew in more detail, one grew in appreciation, one discovered unthought-of complexity, but one did not discover anything ‘new’ nor that what one already held was wrong. Indeed, it was the fear of just such a discovery, implicit in historical investigations, that led neo-scholastic theologians to develop a ‘logical notion’ of development (revelation as a giant enthymeme from which every proposition recorded in Denzinger was but a deduction) in contrast to the more historically grounded view of development used by Newman.¹⁸ But the Instruction – for all its many fears, hesitations and caveats – made the view of truth as genuine discovery by historical investigation a legitimate tool for theologians; and so, perhaps unwittingly, acknowledged that we would discover that we had made mistakes in the past, had used genuinely incomplete evidence and made wrong decisions, and that what was believed in time and place might be genuinely different from that of another, yet both beliefs could fall within the genuine continuity of Christian faith.

¹⁸ See T. O’Loughlin, ‘Newman, Vincent of Lérins and Development’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58(1991)147-66.

The Instruction was a formal acknowledgement of historical investigation as a legitimate method within Catholic theology with all the consequences. As such it was an implicit rejection of the apparatus developed over the previous decades, most of them variations on the notion of the development of doctrine, whose purpose was to acknowledge historical change as uncovered by historians while at the same time denying it any significant historical reality such that it might challenge inherited doctrine. So with the official introduction of historical method into biblical studies, there was the corresponding rejection of the notion of an ahistorical presentation of doctrine. However, there is little evidence that at the time of the Instruction there was any clear awareness that it was sanctioning a new paradigm within theology or, indeed, that it had any implications beyond a change in teaching practice in one part of one area, the gospels within biblical studies – a branch of theology which then, while it was praised as ‘most important,’ was in the second rank of theological and seminary studies where ‘dogma’ and ‘moral’ formed the first division and ‘history’ and liturgy formed the third division.

Ecclesiam suam and history

In contrast with the Instruction, *ES* – perhaps because it was the first letter of the new pope – caused an immediate and widespread stir within the theological community and among Catholics more generally. For all its hesitations and warnings, it seemed to herald Paul VI as a man of the Council, and a pope anxious to speak wisdom to a strife-torn world: the Catholic Church had left its fortress and wished to be in dialogue with, and service to, other Christians, other believers, and the world more generally. The windows opened by John XXIII were going to remain open with his successor;

and the course of the Council would not, the encyclical affirmed, be interrupted. That it marked a new papal attitude to historical enquiry within theology is far less obvious – and indeed does not appear to have been commented upon at the time.

Implicit in the invitation that ‘the world’ and the Catholic Church “should meet together and get to know and love one another” (n.3) is the notion, acknowledged in the encyclical, that the Church “bears in mind the actual situation in which human society finds itself today” (n. 5). This is not a metaphysically, but a historically defined meeting place: the human situation is truly altered and altering within historical processes. This is matched by the need that the Church should engage in self-examination, explicitly acknowledging that its self-knowledge is imperfect and the new “counsels of God’s hidden wisdom may come to light” (n. 9). This self-awareness involves “the actual image which the Church presents to the world today” (n. 10) – and so involves awareness of its existence as the People of God within the processes of human history. And within those processes, there is the hope of renewal and of the corrections of flaws (n. 11). This again involves taking history seriously, so that can be credible “in the surrounding world in which lives and works” (n. 12). This self-awareness and self-criticism (n. 18) is then acknowledged as taking place, like divine revelation – an implicit link to the Instruction – in “an incontestably historical setting” (n. 19) and, consequently, historical investigation must be part of the theological strategies by which it engages in the process of self-awareness.

The declaration that the Church lives within, and revelation takes place within, “an historical setting” might appear to be little more than stating the obvious as if any human action was non-historical. Equally, to believe in Jesus as the Christ involves

the fundamental belief in the incarnation, and divine involvement in human history. However, *ES* has to be read against background of viewing the Church as the *societas perfecta* and the view of revelation as divine truths becoming visible in time. In that older model ‘history’ was acknowledged as equivalent to time’s movement – the ticking of the clock – rather than history as real change which is the result of human activity. The statement that “divine revelation was made ‘in divers ways and divers times’ [Heb 1:1] in an incontestably historical setting” (n. 19) is to move from the neo-scholastic world where ‘historicity’ is that which undermines doctrine to the world where doctrine is examined historically in order to be more fully understood and its significance for human beings, in their lived lives, more adequately grasped. That this vista was glimpsed in *ES* becomes clearer later in the document when it states that “the Church is deeply rooted in the world” and “derives from it a wealth of human culture” while “sharing its vicissitudes.” This, in turn, affects its theological speculation, “its outward life and habits of thought” (n. 26). This involves acknowledging the modern mentality, and growth in intellectual powers and practical ability (n. 28) which is as close to a recognition of the impact on culture of empirical investigation – of which the historical pursuit of truth is a part – as could be expected from a Roman document of the early 1960s.

When Pope Paul turned to the processes of renewal and the significance of dialogue with other Christians, there is another acknowledgement of the importance of critical historical investigations. Renewal involves “searching criticism” (n. 41) – which if it is part of the Church’s pilgrimage implies that mistaken ways have been taken in the past and that these can be recognised as such – and this must be a continual process leading to “re-appraisal of [the Church’s] external conduct” (n. 42) – again this

involves serious historical investigation and judgement. When, moreover, Paul VI proposed “that the sort of relationship for the Church to establish with the world should be more in the nature of a dialogue” (n. 78) there is implicit in such a desire the acknowledgement of an agreed rationality by which questions are investigated; such a rationality cannot be divorced from critical historical method which has emerged out of our modern historical consciousness that we are products of the past and agents creating the future. Thus, the Church “does not hold fast to forms of expression which have lost their meaning and can no longer stir men’s minds” (n. 85) and it must, at the very least, acknowledge “the historical and local circumstances in which it has to exercise its mission” (n. 87).

Taken together, these two documents from 1964 mark a new vision of how the Church must use historical investigation within its life and see the skills of the historian as valuable both in themselves and as part of the theological endeavour. One can see the changes we have already noted in the work of a scholar such as Michael Schmaus as a direct response to this historical turn.

The reception of these insights

It is impossible to draw up a scorecard as to the extent this historical turn has become an integrated part of Catholic theological thinking. A survey shows that its reception has been, at best, mixed. With regards to the Instruction, within the confines of formal biblical studies, as practiced, it has probably been so well received as to have passed from conscious memory – there seem to be few trained biblical scholars who today write from within the old fortresses or who imagine their work as demonstrating the

validity of doctrinal positions.¹⁹ The reception of its implicit approbation of empirical historical methods in theology presents a far more complex scenario. One can find any number of scholarly studies where the denomination of the scholar has not impeded her/his interaction with the best scholarship from whatever stable. However, from the outset not everyone within the Roman curia was happy with this historical turn. Recently, Thomas Bolin has shown that there were many who were far more hesitant that the line taken in the Instruction and that they have had followers down to this day.²⁰ It seems to be one matter to study ancient evidence, and quite another to take on-board the results of that study within theological speculation. Likewise, with regard to historical studies more generally one can find professional historical studies by Catholics which are critical in their approach of the Church's past as those of any other scholar; and where the investigation is carried on with a methodological freedom that would simply not be found when any book claiming to relate to 'church history' was subject to ecclesiastical censorship. However, there has been a general hesitancy in Roman documents to admit that mistakes were made in the past: the style has been one which finds verbal means to imply that there has been no *real* change – with contrary evidence been simply ignored. An example is the frequency with which official documents speak of the poor and of human dignity – an aspect of standard

¹⁹ Though it should be noted that this acceptance is far less obvious among theological students where the demands of historical inquiry are very often felt as faith-threatening.

²⁰ T.M. Bolin, 'The Biblical Commission's Instruction, *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels (Sancta Mater Ecclesia)* and Present Magisterial Attitudes Towards Biblical Exegesis,' *Gregorianum* 93(2012)765-84.

teaching²¹ – without facing awkward facts such as, for example, that until later nineteenth century it was part of the accepted *magisterium* that owning slaves was morally acceptable.²² These complex hesitations – all of which can be traced to the scholastic notions regarding the immutability of doctrine – may be storing up problems for the future.

With regard to scriptural studies, if there is a break between what we assert using our tools of scholarship within the study of ancient evidence and what we assert on the basis of that same body of material, now referred to as ‘the scriptures,’ within theology, then we run the risk both of a theological fundamentalism, and a lack of credibility when we assert that our doctrine is based on our inheritance from the past. Ordinary Catholics absorb the hermeneutic of critical historical studies from our culture and when Church authorities claim historical bases for their statements within a church-specific hermeneutic designed specifically to uphold specific positions, then they are perceived to be engaged in special pleading or worse. Approaching this question from the other end, Catholics can often be shocked by, possibly well-

²¹ See, for example, *Gaudium et spes*, 1.

²² If one wishes to examine this, one can do no better than to read two adjacent articles in the 1908 *Catholic Encyclopaedia*. P. Allard’s article ‘Slavery’ (vol. 14, 36-9) seeks to present the situation in the best light possible glossing over that the 1888 letter of Leo XIII ‘exhorting’ the Brazilian bishops ‘to banish’ slavery was as close as it came to a formal condemnation; while J.J. Fox in ‘Slavery, Ethical Aspects of’ (vol. 14, 39-41), accepting that owning slaves is morally lawful, concludes that possessing slaves’ descendents was lawful, even where title was defective, ‘when the stability of society and the avoidance of grave disturbances demand it.’

intentioned, attempts to present evidence as pointing to some deep continuity rather than face the reality that the understanding of the human condition really changes with human cultures. Most Catholics are shocked to hear that the ‘ordinary *magisterium*’ continued to defend the legitimacy of slavery until it had all but disappeared in western societies (and so had simply ceased to be a question), and are even more appalled when ecclesial apologists rather than admit this – and its implications for moral teaching by Church authorities – seek to claim that this was an exception to the real tradition. For people in our culture the ‘real tradition’ is that which is accessed by empirical history – and other approaches come under the general heading of ‘cover-ups.’ This sense that ‘the Church’ plays by different rules to those we accept in other areas for investigating human conduct in the past, then merely compounds the problem of the *magisterium*’s credibility. In so far as this happens, we have not received *ES*’s awareness of the need to preach while acknowledging the nature of the culture in which we preach.

Some examples of tension

The evidence there are tensions between the past as critically studied and ecclesial claims of continuity since ‘apostolic times’ is too widespread to need illustration. However, here I want to take just three, relatively uncontroversial, examples to illustrate the nature of continuing hesitations about facing clear-cut historical evidence. If in these cases, there is hesitance and obfuscation, it may help us appreciate the distance that we must travel on more controversial topics. The three examples chosen are all from the area of liturgy because in this field the depth of critical historical study – reaching back into the nineteenth century – is at its most

intense; while from the position of the Roman authorities the declarations affecting historical evidence are clear and explicit.

Case A: the use of unleavened bread at the Eucharist.

Anyone who has attended the Eucharist in a non-western rite will know that the bread used is a leavened loaf or, depending on the rite, comes from a leavened loaf. In this matter, it is the western practice that is exceptional. Equally, it is accepted by all that one of the bones of contention leading to schism between the Churches of Constantinople and Rome was the view taken by Constantinople of 'the novelty' of the west introducing unleavened bread,²³ and this departure from 'apostolic tradition' is still pointed out by many eastern clergy. In response to these eastern criticisms, from the tenth-century onwards, there arose a claim in the west that since the Last Supper was at the time of azymes,²⁴ then the original Eucharist used unleavened bread, and therefore the western practice was the more ancient one.²⁵ It was a dialectic with the first premise on each side being that 'we are the more ancient' and hence: 'we are right, you are wrong.'

At the beginning of the twentieth century this was one of the key areas of liturgical study principally because many Reformed Churches faced questions about their use leavened bread or were in turmoil over the introduction of unleavened bread: was this

²³ J.H. Erickson, 'Leavened and Unleavened: Some Theological Implications of the Schism of 1054,' *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 14(1970)155-76.

²⁴ Mk 14:1 and 12.

²⁵ The best study is still R.M. Woolley, *The Bread of the Eucharist* (London 1913).

simply importing a Roman practice or was this the genuinely ancient practice of the churches as Roman apologists had long claimed? The evidence – textual, visual, and archaeological - was plentiful and clear cut: eucharistic gatherings from the earliest times used a real loaf of living bread. Moreover, unleavened bread had been seen as relating to the superseded Jewish practice that was but ‘a shadow of what was to come,’ while azymes was considered ‘dead’ and so ill-suited as a sacrament of the risen and living Christ. Moreover, it was clear that unleavened bread appeared – against the express will of numerous bishops and local councils – as a money-saving device by clergy.²⁶ Not only was this historical judgement accepted by later scholarship, as the twentieth century progressed and as new evidence appeared (e.g. the discovery of large patens) the case became so clear that it is now accepted that from the time of the earliest memorials of the Last Supper it was a loaf of bread that was used as the basis for blessing God.²⁷ If anyone still wanted to think of inter-church dialogue in terms of a contest between competing claims: it would ‘Constantinople: 1; Rome: nil.’

Recalling that *ES* had rejoiced in the meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras (n. 112) and its encouragement of the way of dialogue to overcome schisms, it comes as a surprise to find this in the 1983 *Codex Iusis Canonici*:

²⁶ The evidence is laid out in Woolley.

²⁷ See T. O’Loughlin, ‘The Praxis and Explanations of Eucharistic Fraction in the Ninth Century: the Insular Evidence,’ *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 45(2003)1-20.

In eucharistica celebratione secundum antiquam Ecclesiae latinae traditionem sacerdos adhibeat panem azymum ubicumque litat (Canon 926).²⁸

Canonists might argue that this is not a very serious matter as there is no penalty attached or that the possibility of using any sort of bread is implicitly acknowledged in Canon 924,1 which specifies *ex pane* without further qualification. However, my concern here is with its assertion that it was ‘ancient tradition’ (... *secundum antiquam ... traditionem ...*) of the Roman Church which is open to challenge on the basis that it was not ancient in any accepted use of the term – the period of the ninth–eleventh centuries would not be termed ‘ancient’ by historians – and it only became the tradition because a deviant practice, which in those times was condemned as an abuse, became endemic. However, this failure to engage with historians has a more sinister aspect. First, given that many people will not know the history of this problem, this statement in an authoritative book leads them to conclude that there was ‘an ancient tradition’ for they trust the competence of the Code when it makes claims. No contemporary document should be issued without weighing the possibility of such misleading communication. Second, and more seriously, the canonists were aware that this was an ancient *casus belli* and of the staunch counter-claims of Rome against Constantinople – and, apparently, rather than ‘break faith’ with their earlier claims – admitting they predecessors has simply been wrong – they opted for this unqualified use of ‘ancient’ which is, on the one hand, historically meaningless because it is

²⁸ This is rendered in the quasi-official Canon Law Society translation into English of 1983 as:

In the eucharistic celebration, in accordance with the ancient tradition of the latin [sic] Church, the priest is to use unleavened bread whenever he celebrates Mass.

devoid of a date range, while, on the other hand, it seems to cover the credibility of the earlier polemics against Constantinople and some of the Reformers.

In short, they not only needed to consult historians, but (1) to reflect on their own attitude to historical evidence, and (2) assess whether the attitude taken to historical evidence was credible in contemporary discourse. It might be asserted that this is a matter of little importance, but if that is the case (and neither Eastern theologians nor contemporary western liturgists think it un-important) then it is a simple blunder due to historical incompetence which should be put right forthwith.

Case B: the necessity of an institution narrative for the celebration of the Eucharist.

It has been a lynch-pin of much theological discourse for centuries that the Eucharist is ‘confectured’ with ‘the eucharistic words of Jesus’ and those words have achieved quasi-mystical status as can be seen in the way many presbyters utter them. Indeed, if one reads Canon 927 – on the illegality of consecrating bread or wine or both outside of a eucharistic celebration – then it seems clear that the existence of the words of consecration and the reality of a Eucharist are one and the same. This linkage has not been questioned for well over a millennium in the west, it underlies most of the controversies, and all western practice has somewhere within it an ‘institution narrative’ or as those words were described in pre-Vatican II liturgy: ‘a consecration formula.’²⁹ Despite this apparent clarity, it was known that the East Syrian tradition, which used the Anaphora of the Apostles Addai and Mari, did not have an institution

²⁹ See T. O’Loughlin, ‘The “Eucharistic Words of Jesus”’: An Un-noticed Silence in our Earliest Sources,’ *Anaphora* 8,1(2014)1-12.

narrative. So was it case that it never had the narrative – in which case it would be an ancient witness to variation on what seemed a crucial point – or was it a case that it had dropped out of use by error – which seemed hard to credit given the importance attached to words in other traditions?³⁰

Gradually over the course of the twentieth century historians began to recognise that the far from the unified history that had been imagined for the earliest period, it was actually a time of diversity and the consistency of ‘the tradition’ a result of later times.³¹ From this perspective it came to be recognised that the institution narrative was not part of the earliest eucharistic prayers, but a later addition – and so the Prayer of Addai and Mari was an isolated survivor: a witness to even earlier moment in the tradition than any other anaphora still in use.³² So one could have ‘Mass without a consecration!’ The evidence being so clear-cut, it was with a sense of relief that many

³⁰ The whole controversy can be found narrated in R. Taft, ‘Mass Without the Consecration? The Historic Agreement on the Eucharist between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East Promulgated 26 October 2001,’ *Worship* 77(2003)482-509; and, for background, see two articles by S. Jammo, ‘The Quddasha of the Apostles Addai and Mari and the Narrative of the Eucharistic Institution,’ *Syriac Dialogue* 1(1994)168-82; and ‘The Anaphora of the Apostles Addai and Mari: A Study of Structure and Historical Background,’ *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 68(2002)5-35.

³¹ See A. Baumstark, *On the Historical Development of the Liturgy* (Collegetown, MN 2011)[ET by F. West of *Vom geschichtlichen Werden der Liturgie*, Freiburg, 1923].

³² See L. Ligier, ‘The Origins of the Eucharistic Prayer,’ *Studia Liturgica* 9(1973)161-85.

read the *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East* issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity on 20 July 2001 which recognised the Prayer of Addai and Mari as a genuine and complete eucharistic prayer despite the absence of an institution narrative.³³ This document has been praised as one of the most important declarations in ecumenical relations since the Second Vatican Council.³⁴ Here it is clear that what persuaded the Vatican to act was not only the ecumenical possibilities of greater understanding with the Churches of the east which the declaration made possible, but the recognition that the historical evidence was overwhelming.

While such an engagement with the historical sciences is to be welcomed – it could not have happened but for the sort of scholarship sanctioned by the Instruction and the sort of dialogue initiated by *ES* – it should not be assumed that the older attitudes to history have now been left behind. The acceptance of the Prayer of Addai and Mari as a genuine anaphora implies that it is complete, but the rationale for the acceptance is based on the notion that it has an ‘implicit institution narrative.’ This might seem otiose, and indeed silly, as it is either a genuine anaphora or not [and Rome accepts that it is] and it either has or has not an institution narrative [which it has not]. While ‘saving face’ is an acceptable part of any reconciliation process, one fears that there is more involved here than having both sides apparently ‘in the right.’ The appeal to an

³³ The text can be found on the Vatican’s website.

³⁴ M.E. Johnson, ‘Liturgy and Ecumenism: Gifts, Challenges, and Hopes for a Renewed Vision,’ *Worship* 80(2006)2-29 at 20, draws attention to the fact that implications of the 2001 Roman acknowledgment of the authenticity of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari are ‘mind-boggling.’

‘implicit institution narrative’ implies that historical discoveries cannot undermine historical certainties when they are held to belong to the *magisterium* – this is a serious failure to grasp the nature of the historical turn within theology, and within liturgical studies in particular, and a failure to recognise how significant is the transparent gathering of empirical evidence within modern culture.

Case C: the text of Eucharistic Prayer I.

Within the sole Eucharistic Prayer recognised for the Latin Rite in the period prior to 1969 there occurs, since the earliest *editio typica* and long before it, these words to be said by the presiding presbyter:

Memento, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuarum et omnium circumstantium, quorum tibi fides cognita est et nota devotio, pro quibus tibi offerimus: vel qui tibi offerunt hoc sacrificium laudis, pro se suisque omnibus ... tibi que reddunt vota sua aeterno Deo, vivo et vero.

At a quick glance it looks like a sentence, but a closer examination reveals that phrase *vel qui tibi offerunt* simply do not make sense.³⁵ So what do they mean and how does it come about they are present in this most important of prayers? The first move for any historian seeking to resolve such a problem is, following the advice of Jean Mabillon (1632-1707), to invoke the aid of palaeography: could it be that the text has become corrupt in manuscript transmission? This is exactly what was done by

³⁵ For a fuller study of this prayer, its history and its problems, see T. O’Loughlin, ‘The *Commemoratio pro vivis* of the Roman Canon: a Textual Witness to the Evolution of Western Eucharistic Theologies?’ in J. Day and M. Vincent eds, *Studia Patristica [Early Roman Liturgy to 600]* 71(2014)69-91.

Edmund Bishop in an article in 1903 where he looked at all the then known early manuscripts of the Roman Canon.³⁶ He established that at an earlier stage the text read simply *qui tibi offerunt* and that *pro quibus tibi offerimus* was a variant introduced at some point, along with a rubrical *vel*, which, through faulty copying, became interpolated into the text. That mistakes of this sort occurred should surprise no one: biblical text critics had been collecting and regaling classes with such howlers since the Renaissance. Bishop's article was reprinted in 1918,³⁷ became widely known, and his explanation was accepted in all the standard works on the history of the liturgy.³⁸ Surprisingly perhaps, it was not picked up in the revised missal of 1969 which repeated the blunder, but subsequently most translators aware both of the problem and the explanation of Edmond Bishop simply ignored the phrase and silently corrected the text to: "We offer you this sacrifice of praise for ourselves and those who are dear to us."

However, when a new Latin edition of the *Missale Romanum* appeared – which was not produced in haste as was the edition of 1969 – it was somewhat discouraging to see the old blunder was repeated again. Even more alarming, faced with a definite historical blunder, the translators chose to ignore certain human knowledge of what is the true tradition of the Roman Canon in favour of an ahistorical affirmation of the

³⁶ 'On the earliest texts of the Roman Canon,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 4(1903)555-77.

³⁷ *Liturgica Historica: Papers on the Liturgy and Religious Life of the Western Church* (Oxford 1918), 77-115.

³⁸ See J.A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Missarum Sollemnia* (ET by F.A. Brunner, New York, NY 1955), vol. 2, 159-69 at 167.

perfection of the Latin text as infallible, presumably on the basis that such a view is authorised by the 2001 instruction *Liturgiam authenticam*.³⁹ One suspects that they do not see the work of historians as having any real contribution to the theological enterprise. We now have a text in common use which does not make sense, and if anyone asks her/his local pastor the explanation of the phrase (assuming he knows the facts) will have to be told that it is a simple blunder – and long known to be such – but no one among the bishops was courageous enough to return the text to its true form. The resulting gasp can be taken as a measure of how deeply critical historical consciousness has become part of our understanding.

Where are we now?

The evidence for biblical studies assembled by Bolin in 2012 and for the historical turn more generally as noted here suggests that insofar as the *magisterium* is concerned there has not been much progress over the last fifty years.⁴⁰ There seems to be a far greater interest in the notion of the constancy and consistency in and with what is imagined, *a priori*, as past teaching. Coupled with this is a fear that if one admits that if the *magisterium* made mistakes in the past – and so there is need for change; then it follows, that that it could be mistaken in the present – and so positions now defended *à outrance* may one day, on the basis of a greater base of empirically gathered evidence, need to be changed. This vista may seem so frightening and so close to

³⁹ For a study of the historical blunders contained in that Instruction, see P. Jeffrey, *Translating Tradition: A Chant Historian Reads Liturgiam Authenticam* (Collegeville, MN 2005).

⁴⁰ Kerr's *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* is the best survey.

‘historicism’ – that *bête noire* of the neo-scholastic mind – as to justify removing historical evidence to the periphery of argument, but it may be a very short sighted policy even for those who claim to have a different model of human truth from that which animates historical investigation – a claim, incidentally, I do not believe any Catholic can sustain on the basis of the unity of the truth.⁴¹

My reason for doubting the utility of the Vatican’s hesitations regarding history comes from an incident in the dentist’s chair, while waiting for a filling, since I began writing this paper. My local dentist gave me the various options for the filling, their pros and cons, and all the evidence pointed towards a particular treatment of the problem. The dentist laid out the options for me but I had to decide on the path to be followed on the basis of the evidence. This was rather different from the manner in which a dentist not so long ago would have that just seen the problem and fixed it as he through best without discussion. My dentist laid out the options declaring that this was ‘evidence-based dentistry’; and the evidence gathering and presentation logic he used was nothing other than a variant and adaptation of critical historical method. Catholics might do well to recall that we live in a world of ‘evidence-based dentistry’ and ‘evidence-based medicine’ more generally (and we probably should pray that we might live in a culture of evidence-based politics), we might note that we have long had evidence-based palaeography and evidence-based editing of the Scriptures, and that we seek evidence-based studies of the corporate failings of the bodies both within and without the Church, while we abhor obfuscation and cover-ups as part of the

⁴¹ See A. Dondeyne, *Contemporary European Thought and Christian Faith* (ET E. McMullan and J. Burnheim, Pittsburgh, PA 1958), 36-66 on ‘the historical character of human existence.’

paternalist world which denies human dignity. In such a world we should view the Instruction and *ES* as having opened the doors to a greater role for critical history and should be steadily expanding its role within theology, so that we can have fruitful dialogue with each other, with other Christians, and with humanity while we journey as God' pilgrim people towards the eschaton: where alone knowing and truth can exist in fullness.