

Concluding Remarks: The Magisterium of Pius XII in a Historical Perspective

Klaus Unterburger

Ludwig Maximilians-Universität München, Deutschland

Abstract From the 19th century onwards, ‘teaching’ was increasingly seen as the core task of the popes; the pontificate of Pope Pius XII can be seen here as a preliminary climax of an increasing intensification of the papal teaching office, which also extended to more and more topics. It was a relatively small group of theologians from the Roman universities who determined not only the work of the Holy Office, but also the drafting of papal teaching documents. Professionalisation and a certain standardisation of papal teaching were guided by the attempt to restrict themselves to the area of principles of faith and morals. Anti-modernist tendencies remained dominant; the relationship to the succeeding pontificate and the Second Vatican Council with its divergent objectives thus remains an open question.

Keywords Magisterium. Professionalisation. Romanisation. Anti-modernism. Scientific progress. Vatican Council II.

Summary 1 Uniformity and Professionalisation Through Romanisation. – 2 Attempts Towards an Anti-Modernist Reading of the Present. – 3 Self-Restriction to the Level of Principles. – 4 Open Questions.



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The contributions in this issue offer an instructive and impressive picture of a central aspect of papal self-understanding and curial practice under Pope Pius XII. This is not a matter of course: the pope, whose task it is to instruct the faithful ever more frequently and extensively, is a concept that became more and more prevalent in the course of the nineteenth century. It went hand in hand with a fundamental reinterpretation of ecclesiastical ministry, which for centuries had always been treated under two aspects of canon law: sacramental ordination and jurisdiction. It is certainly no coincidence that around 1850 this binary scheme was replaced in canon law manuals by a trinitarian one, which had previously been developed primarily in Calvinism; the sacramental priesthood and jurisdiction were joined by the teaching ministry. The three aspects were now summarised as participation in the threefold ministry of Christ as priest, shepherd, and teacher.¹

A simple glance at the “Denzinger” shows how the Pope increasingly became a teacher and taught more and more frequently. But it was not only the frequency that increased, the range of topics also expanded. This is particularly evident in the formula “de rebus fidei et morum” of the First Vatican Council, as a parallel doctrinal authority was now claimed for matters of morality, as well as for the preservation of the *depositum fidei*.² At the Council of Trent, “mores” was still understood to mean tradition, i.e. the oral transmission of faith. Under Pius XII in particular, there was an enormous increase in statements on questions of morality, technology and social development as well as scientific issues.³ The aim was, of course, to interpret the accelerated process of transformation in the light of faith and to provide the faithful with guidance, not to find a direct solution at the level of secular science itself. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how broad the Pope’s interests were and how carefully he tried to make himself familiar with the different issues. The decisive factor here was, of course, his collaborators, on whom he relied, and thus above all the circle of Consultors who, as members of the Holy Office, were the experts for the purity and the application of the faith, and who are repeatedly the protagonists of the contributions in this journal issue. Three aspects characterise the exercise of the magisterium under Pope Pius XII and determine both the negative teaching by means of book censorship and prohibitions, but also the positive teaching by means of encyclicals and other forms of teaching:

1 Fuchs, *Magisterium*.

2 Unterburger, *Revolution*.

3 Seckler, *Theologie*.

1 Uniformity and Professionalisation Through Romanisation

Perhaps the most striking insight is how strongly the papal-curial teaching was dominated by a relatively small number of recurring names of theologians. Étienne Fouilloux points out that *Humani generis* was written by almost the same group of theologians as the dogma of the Assumption; the project of the resumption of the Vatican Council (1948-1951) was also formulated by the same group.⁴ Among the dominant group, the Jesuits should of course be mentioned at the forefront:⁵ Franz Hürth, Sebastiaan Tromp, Augustinus Bea, Joseph Creusen; then there are theologians from other Roman theological colleges, who were often supported by other religious orders, such as Dominicans like Mariano Cordovani or a Franciscan like Carlo Balić or a secular priest like Pietro Parente. On the one hand, this led to a certain coherence between the various doctrinal statements of the Pope and a certain standardisation of church doctrine. The Holy Office thus also guaranteed doctrinal continuity with previous decisions and a specific Roman character of magisterial teaching. The Roman academic system itself had been the subject of a papal reform for several years, the aim of which was to introduce minimum academic standards and to raise the level of requirements for the degrees being awarded there.⁶ This professionalisation of Roman theology in such a way also had an impact on the work of the theologians in the Holy Office and the various sub-commissions. However, the fact that theological consultants from different religious orders were always involved is also significant, as this meant that different school directions, such as Thomism and Scotism, were represented. This meant that, despite the unity of principles, a certain freedom of teaching was maintained both in terms of content and method. In any case, these influential Jesuits largely followed the principle that it was the speculative principles that mattered, but that a certain flexibility and openness was necessary when it came to specific school opinions.⁷

⁴ Cf. the contribution by Étienne Fouilloux in this issue of JoMaCC.

⁵ Teuffenbach, *Einfluss*.

⁶ Unterburger, *Lehramt*.

⁷ Unterburger, *Lehramt*, 417-37.

2 Attempts Towards an Anti-Modernist Reading of the Present

It is not surprising that the Roman actors were more or less all characterised by a view of modernity as a history of decadence and apostasy from the truth. The ecclesiastical statements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are full of an interpretation of modernity that saw beginning with the Renaissance and the Reformation a history of ever greater errors and apostasy from the truth. The highly systematic and speculative character of Roman theologians suggested a view that false philosophical principles or erroneous fundamental preliminary decisions could be identified behind individual errors. In the modernism crisis under Pius X, the encyclical *Pascendi* wanted to identify such fundamental philosophical errors behind individual heresies: Agnosticism, evolutionism and vital immanence.⁸ It is certainly no coincidence that Pius X was 1954 canonised by Pius XII.⁹ The idea of updating the condemnation on the 50th anniversary of *Pascendi* was also pursued. David Zettel interpreted the encyclical *Humani generis* as the last great document of papal anti-modernism,¹⁰ however, the contribution by Sabine Schratz and Daniele Premoli makes it clear that the Pope's last years were characterised by the attempt to attribute and condemn all the individual errors of modernity to false modernist principles in a solemn encyclical.¹¹ The topics of the debate on modernism also continued to occupy Roman theology: the question of the inerrancy of the Bible and its interpretation,¹² the question of the development of doctrine,¹³ the teachings of Henri Bergson and Eduard Le Roy, who were thought to be hidden behind the conceptions of Teilhard de Chardin,¹⁴ the questions of apologetics and the understanding of dogma, which were negotiated with the *Nouvelle théologie*,¹⁵ and so on.

⁸ Arnold, Vian, *La Redazione*; Arnold, "Modernismus als Kampfbegriff?".

⁹ Arnold, *Kleine Geschichte*, 139.

¹⁰ Zettel, *Ein letztes Aufbäumen*.

¹¹ Cf. the contribution by Sabine Schratz and Daniele Premoli in this issue.

¹² Cf. the contribution by Peter Pfister in this issue.

¹³ Cf. the contribution by Matthias Daufratshofer in this issue; see also Daufratshofer, *Das päpstliche Lehramt*.

¹⁴ Cf. the contribution by Merce Prats in this issue.

¹⁵ Cf. the contribution by Étienne Fouilloux in this issue.

3 Self-Restriction to the Level of Principles

On the other hand, however, there is also the concern not to exceed one's own competence and thus to impose a kind of methodological self-limitation. A new, humiliating "Galileo affair" should be avoided. When drafting the last, unpublished encyclical, the Pope warned against touching the field of natural science.¹⁶ A similar tendency can be observed when analysing the case of Teilhard de Chardin and the drafting of the encyclical *Humani generis*.¹⁷ Teilhard was expected to be supervised by the Jesuit order and its pre-censorship.¹⁸ Facts of faith such as original sin were to be preserved intact; otherwise, however, people wanted to take as little of a stance as possible on scientific issues such as palaeontology. There was a parallel situation in biblical exegesis, where faith and fundamental theorems that seemed necessary for the foundation of faith (doctrine of inspiration, historicity of the Gospels) were also defended; however, there was a tendency at the Bible Institute around Bea to judge decisions of the Bible Commission that concerned purely historical matters as historical-temporal statements themselves.¹⁹ Certainly, these were also retreat battles in both areas, natural science and historical biblical exegesis. However, it also corresponded to a certain logic if philosophical and theological principles were the decisive factor in the eyes of the theologians, while empirical facts in themselves could not threaten faith. Bea hoped that biblical archaeology would support faith, but considered the methods of literary and form criticism, which were characterised by false philosophies, to be dangerous.²⁰ In some areas, however, limits were also reached: as plausible as the doctrine of just war was *a priori*, it no longer seemed suitable for the interpretation of modern war and a just post-war order after 1945.²¹ Other developments in society also seemed to suggest new interpretations, which Jacques Maritain, for example, stood for, and which concerned the concepts of Christian humanism and personalism, democracy and human rights.²² Ottaviani and Tromp were worried here and wanted to use the Pope's last encyclical, which never appeared, for a solemn condemnation.²³ The complex negotiated under the term situational ethics reflects the uncertainty as to how

¹⁶ Cf. the contribution by Sabine Schratz and Daniele Premoli in this issue.

¹⁷ Cf. the contribution by Mercè Prats and Étienne Fouilloux, in this issue.

¹⁸ Karl Rahner was also to be supervised by his order. Cf. Arnold, *Schwierigkeiten*.

¹⁹ Pfister, *Ein Mann*, and also his contribution within this issue.

²⁰ Pfister, *Ein Mann*, and also his contribution within this issue.

²¹ Cf. the contribution by Augustin Laffay in this issue.

²² Cf. the contribution from Federico Ferrari in this issue

²³ Cf. the contribution by Sabine Schratz and Daniele Premoli in this issue.

abstract ethical principles and the ever-changing empirical science are related and led to a vigorous attitude of resistance on the part of the Holy Office.²⁴

4 Open Questions

In consequence, fundamental questions remain unanswered which require intensive further research. On the one hand, there is the question of the lines of development during the pontificate of Pius XII. Was there an anti-modernist hardening at the end? This seems to have affected the judgement of the ecumenical movement, for example.²⁵ At the same time, however, there also seem to have been certain tendencies towards greater openness, for example with regard to the value placed on democracy. In order to answer such questions, it is necessary to analyse not only the thinking of the Pope himself, but also that of his advisory bodies, advisors and collaborators. In this sense, the articles in this journal issue are certainly pioneering studies.

However, there are also obvious and burning questions about the references to the subsequent pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. If the last planned encyclical of Pius XII had been published, the Second Vatican Council would hardly have been conceivable in this form. Nevertheless, an interpretation of the Council that sees it as a successful coup against the Roman theology that dominated under Pius XII is too simplistic. Certain frontal positions, for example between Bea and Archbishop Ruffini, had already developed during the previous pontificate. Not only personal constellations at the Council often had a long history in the milieu of Roman theology and thus developed slowly. Rather than distinguishing between doctrinal continuity and discontinuity, it seems more reasonable to switch to the level of the history of problems. In any case, most of the topics of the Council have not only occupied theology, but also the Holy Office and its Consultors for a long time. The observation that problems can change and intensify to such an extent that they lead to new conceptions of the Magisterium is a question that also needs to be discussed further.

²⁴ Cf. the contribution by Federico Ferrari in this issue.

²⁵ Cf. the contribution by Saretta Marotta in this issue; Cf. also Marotta, *Gli anni della pazienza*.

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