

The Book of Common Prayer as Magisterium

by Roberta Bayer

The term magisterium comes from the latin *magister* which is commonly translated as teacher.

Magistero, the verb, is the activity of person who holds the office of director or chief. Anglicans have a magisterial set of teachings in the Book of Common Prayer, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, and the Ordinal, which is the service for ordaining Bishops, Priest, and Deacons. They reflect what one might call mere Christianity, a distillation of the accepted, historical teaching of the Christian church. Implied is the idea that inherited wisdom shaped by scholars steeped in God's Holy Word, and the example of the blood of the holy martyrs, was a surer foundation for the English church than the will of any particular *magister*, be he Pope or King.

Loss of confidence in Popes and Kings was common in the era in which Anglicanism was born.

Anglican reformers opposed the actions of the more radical reformers on the continent who were driving the city states of Europe into political upheaval out of opposition to the corruption of the church in Rome. Some of the most extreme fell into thinking that subjective judgement, untutored opinion, was all in all.

On the continent, other mainstream Reformation states like Calvin's Geneva instituted a political structure which preserved order and learning, and at the same time ensured liberty for its citizens.

Although the particular relation of church and state in Scotland and Geneva was rejected by those in England, the latter developed their own distinctive approach. This was articulated by Richard Hooker in the *Laws of the Ecclesiastical Polity*. He argued that the Church of England was to be ordered by law based on reason and revelation. By reason he did not mean independent, subjective judgement, as we would today, but rather an educated wisdom, informed by the Fathers of the church, and the greatest

philosophers.

The soul of man is capable of divine perfection, and has the faculties, not only of growing into 'sensible knowledge', that is the knowledge given by the senses, but also of reaching higher than sensible things. Hooker wrote that it is only when man comprehends those things which lower creatures cannot, such as contradictions in speech, that we have the use of our natural reason. To which if one adds, he remarked, the help of true art and learning, meaning the study of the Church Fathers, in addition to Plato and Aristotle, then maturity of judgement would be seen. Reason must be trained up, it must not be left in its 'innocency,' if it is to serve a purpose. "Education and instruction are the means, the one by use, the other by precept, to make our natural faculty of reason both the better and the sooner able to judge rightly between truth and error, good and evil." (Book I, chapter 6)

At the time of the Anglican reformation, an increasingly literate middle class demanded that they be allowed to read the Bible for themselves. They claimed to have the wisdom to read and interpret it autonomously. This was a two edged sword. Clearly, to place the Bible in the hands of the people was necessary. It was a return to the practices of the early Christians; it was not an 'innovation'. On the other hand, that reading needed to be guided. Hence the church put together a magisterial set of books to act as law. People had the Bible, they had the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the ordered practice of prayer as given in the Book of Common Prayer, and they had the sacraments, protected by the ordinal.

So the the idea was to create an educated church, a church which was learned in the history and the theology of Christendom, its laws held in understanding and doctrines founded on true belief. As one prays with the Book of Common Prayer in conjunction with the Bible, one cannot help noticing that its prayers are almost entirely composed of scriptural passages, and that those passages are chosen and

ordered to teach key Christian doctrines. Those passages that come not directly from scripture, such as collects, echo scripture, and date in large part to the ancient church. The Book of Common Prayer is the distillation of that teaching in the Anglican context, and that is why it is magisterial.

One might think that in our times such a church built on the idea of a rational and educated individual, guided by books which tie his prayer life and Bible reading at home to the traditions of the church, would be quite amenable. But today people object to the discipline, they think that their liberty should stand unchallenged, and they forget reason must be schooled before it is free. True reason is reason with wisdom and understanding. That is why we live in a time when innovation is so dangerous. It is the old sin, the sin of Adam and Eve, to be too fond of our own our unschooled judgement. To that end we destroy our church and our faith.

I am forced to ask of those who desire innovation: if these innovations are founded on the BCP and scripture, why was it not seen by the holy and learned teachers of the past? I ask them to think again what it means to be under the BCP as magisterium. Surely the answer cannot be to take a line from it here or there to justify one's own desires. Instead it is to stand under it, to learn from it, to take its order into one's soul and practice its daily discipline. Humility, rather than intellectual pride, would be the result.