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**The Theology of the Magisterium  
in the Thought of Cardinal Avery Dulles**

**Thesis of the Doctoral Dissertation**

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The dissertation analyses a special part of the diverse theological oeuvre of Cardinal-Deacon Avery Dulles (1918–2008), which focuses on the role of the Magisterium. The American theologian considers „the pluralistic model of ecclesiastical authority” to be the most essential aspect of authority. Dulles elaborates his model in the broader context of communion ecclesiology proposed by the Second Vatican Council with regard to (1) the communion between Christ and his Church, and (2) the communion between the Bishop of Rome and the College of Bishops, and between local churches under a bishop’s authority. In the framework of these two basic theological dimensions, Dulles distinguishes (1) the *par excellence* divine authority of the incarnated Logos (Christ), that is to be transmitted through the authority structure of the church, from (2) the „secondary authorities” in the church, that are essentially characterised by their structured diversity, and the slightly different forms they took at different periods. Dulles’s structured approach had two precedents: Melchior Cano’s vision of *loci theologici* in the 16th century, and the article 10.4 of *Dei Verbum* issued at the Second Vatican Council, describing the threefold relationship between Tradition, Scripture, and the Magisterium. The chapter dedicated to the historical background of the topic offers a detailed description of these precedents. The secondary authorities according to Dulles are the following: the Sacred Scripture, the Holy Tradition, the sense of faith of believers, the pastoral office, and the theologians. The systematic theology of authority reveals how Christ, the primary divine authority and source of all secondary authorities accompanies and guides his pilgrim people through the history of salvation. Thus, the foundation of ecclesiology and the cornerstone of canon law is in fact, a correctly understood theology of authority.

Since the Church can be regarded both as a „universal sacrament of salvation” and as a sociological reality, and these two aspects don’t exclude but complement each other, we can rightfully deal with the question of authority in the Church from these two aspects. Some theologians work with a „top-down” model of the theology of authority and the practice of ecclesiastical authority, emphasizing its sacramental aspect, as for example Leo Scheffczyk. Others, on the other hand, have a „bottom-up” model that represents the dynamics of authority working in the Christ-founded historical community starting from social laws of the function of authority, as for example Karl Rahner. Dulles’s pluralistic model of ecclesiastical authority intends to mediate between these the *bottom-up* and the *top-down* concepts while integrating them. Dulles’s oeuvre focusing on this subject is coherent enough to serve as a raw material for our structured analysis of the topic. However, while elaborating the details of the picture as a whole, we find it important to indicate the occasional changes of emphasis effectuated by the author. The theologian wasn’t determined to concentrate all his attention on this topic, rather, he was spontaneously inspired by certain situations in his life, so he returned to it from time to time. This intermittent workflow finally resulted in a synthesis that Dulles published a year before his death in form of the monography *Magisterium*. The introduction of the dissertation gives a general overview of the conceptual basis – like the one outlined above, but further to be developed –, and an outline of chapters, methodology, and describes the Dulles-experience that inspired the author.

The first chapter of the dissertation starts with a brief description of Dulles’s childhood, youth, family background and studies. Then the author outlines the three periods of Dulles’s professional life strictly from the point of view of his theology of authority: why did he elaborate it, what impacts he had that moved him in this direction, and what were the most important milestones of this oeuvre. These periods can be best symbolized by the three universities where the author deployed his teaching activity by a given time. Luckily, each of these periods saw the birth of one of Dulles’s books that can be regarded as a point of culmination in the development of the author’s thought analysed here. Also, other types of shorter publications are naturally associated with these books.

Woodstock College (1960–1974). Thanks to his family roots and his studies at Harvard, Dulles turned to the subject of ecclesiastical authority with substantial knowledge in political science. The young Jesuit, who arrived in Rome when Pope Pius XII died, who witnessed how the Second Vatican Council was summoned, and returned to the United States in 1960 after defending his doctoral thesis written on the „prophetic office” (Gregorian University, Rome), Dulles was obviously very much interested in theoretical questions of ecclesiastical governance. After returning home, the young theologian followed the guidelines of the contemporary universal council from over the sea, conveyed them professionally to his fellow countrymen, and was actively engaged in the implementation of council decisions. Dulles worked as a consultant to the papal secretariat in Rome founded to promote the dialogue with non-believers from 1966 to 1973, and from 1969 on he served as advisor to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Thus, in the first period of his academic career the reflections of the Jesuit theologian on ecclesiastical authority were inspired not only by continuous academic activity, but also by his working experience. His thoughts first appeared in articles and presentations and later in books (*The Survival of Dogma*, 1971). In these early publications, we find Dulles’s responses to the crisis of reception of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and to the perception of Hans Küng’s understanding of infallibility.

Catholic University of America (1974–1988). The second period of Dulles’s career was the blossoming of his academic life. The theology of ecclesiastical authority remained a constant research subject in his publications while he continued to work as an occasional advisor to various episcopal bodies in the Holy See and in America, and gained additional experience in the ecclesiastical service of the „hierarchical Magisterium”. Dulles’s ecumenical activities and his participation in interdenominational theological committees became more intense during this period, and this activity often contextualised his dealing with specifically Catholic topics. The most important vantage point of the evolution of Dulles’s thought in this period of his career analysed in this dissertation is a new book (*The Resilient Church*, 1977). However, Dulles’s name became internationally known in connection with the development of his model analysis method. In 1974 he published *Models of the Church*, which has since been translated into half-dozen languages, and was followed by *Models of Revelation*. In these works, he pays attention to the system of relationships between God the revelator’s primary authority and the secondary church authorities, its mediators, while examining the basic theme from the point of view of fundamental theology. The theological content of these two books is discussed in the third chapter of the dissertation.

Fordham University (1988–2008). The main novelties in the third period of Dulles’s academic career were to be found in his work of re-evaluation and synthesis. As we have been able to represent each of the earlier periods with a book summarizing his thoughts on the theology of ecclesiastical authority, in this case we would like to refer to his last book, *Magisterium* (2007). Though this book of the author, made cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 2001, appeared in the form of a textbook, it is the most important testimony of his work of re-evaluation and synthesis. In the middle of his career, Dulles became member of the International Theological Committee of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1992–1997), and parallel to this, he became increasingly interested in Pope John Paul II’s activity in the Magisterium. Also, Dulles paid special attention to the reception of the Holy See documents published by this time (e.g. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 1994). He participated in the professional debates around the declarations of the Holy See not only out of a theologian’s academical interest, but as an „advocate” of the Magisterium, and he felt an increasing drive to support more actively the positive reception of these declarations.

As mentioned earlier, it was Dulles himself, who summarized and revisited the main conclusions of his thought concerning the theology of the Magisterium in a short monograph

at the end of his life. The last part of this chapter places the *Magnum Opus* in the context of the entire oeuvre, which proves the maturity of the old cardinal's synthesis.

The comments on the different career periods of the cardinal made in the first chapter would like to highlight the policy followed while compiling the bibliography of the dissertation. The most important objective was to reconstruct the discourse on the works of Cardinal Dulles on the Magisterium based on the author's own works and references. The secondary objective was to research the most important authors and works needed in European context to introduce Cardinal Dulles's oeuvre to the Hungarian public.

The second chapter of the dissertation is a properly focused historical overview of the main theme of the dissertation and of Dulles's approach. The evolution of doctrine observed in the theological history of the Magisterium can be understood only on a biblical basis, therefore the American theologian's thought is rooted there. The history of authority-forms mediating revelation in early Christianity as it is documented by the New Testament, can be conceived as a theological self-understanding process. During the first millennium it was commonly accepted that authentic ecclesiastical mediation was ensured mainly by the consensus of the Apostolic Tradition and the Universal Church. This is expressed in the much-cited principle of *antiquitas et universalitas*. The latter concept was represented and justified in the idea of councils and especially of ecumenical councils. These councils were events of both diacronic and synchronic consensus in the church because of the presence of the participating bishops. This was precisely what justified the special magisterial importance they had. From the 9th century onwards, the faith in the infallibility of the councils became solidified. The concept of the Magisterium becomes a theological problem only in the second millennium, following the East-West Schism (1054).

The process of consensus and reception can be best observed in the working of the councils. For bishops, these were actually the locations where they could declare if a consensus was obtained, or places of consensus-building in case of controversy. Since bishops were the main representants of the faith of their local churches in the universal church, it was self-evident in the first millennium that the entire local church was involved in the appointment of the bishop. On the other hand, since bishops represented the faith of the universal church in their local churches, the universal church had to participate in their authorization. This was expressed in the ancient practice that new candidates had to be consecrated by at least three bishops. Towards the end of Early Christianity, the communion-centred thought of the church lost its importance, and a new concept gained acceptance. According to this, impulses of life flow from the head, the pope, to the peripheries of the body. Thus, the principle of consensus gradually lost its reputation.

In the Latin Church during the Middle Ages particular emphasis was placed on questions of how to mediate salvation, and of the concept of mediation itself. There is a twofold path in the theology of salvation mediation. If it is considered as grace, the mediators are the sacraments. But if we consider it as truth, the mediator is the ecclesiastical authority, the Magisterium supported by the enlightening activity of the Holy Spirit. Logically, these premises indicated that the main „mediator”, the pope received special attention. The doctrine of infallibility of the bishop of Rome was formulated in the 13th century, but it was defined dogmatically only later, at the First Vatican Council. The Council made the Pope's infallibility subject to certain conditions (cf. DH 3074). Parallel to this centralization process, the role of laymen was essentially reduced to reception.

In the Middle Ages the question of the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) of the faithful was raised not out of ecclesiological but of epistemological interest. It was St. Thomas Aquinas who made remarkable statements concerning the problem. According to him, we can assume that the *sensus fidelium* is bound to the Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church as objective data. Anyone who does not abide by them represents an opinion that is possibly

mistaken, or worse, it is a heresy. Each Christian, however, is capable of recognizing the truth, that is, to make correct judgements on matters of faith.

In the modern age, the ecclesiastical Magisterium, received radical criticism from Protestantism on the one hand and from rationalism on the other. The problematics in the modern age was caused by the contradiction between the doctrinal statements of the Magisterium that claim definitiveness, and the importance of the recognition of historicity. The Council of Trent defined the competence of the Magisterium as being limited to the subject of „faith and morals” (*res fidei et morum*), although this definition did not completely dissipate uncertainties.

In the post-Trentin scholastic thought (as a reaction to protestant thought) a treatise on the Magisterium came to the fore. The development of the theory of ecclesiastical Magisterium was principally the work of Spanish Dominicans (Vittoria, Cano, Bañez) and Jesuits (Suárez, Vázquez, Molina). Melchior Cano’s theory of theological locations (*loci theologici*) is the most important precedent in the Christian Tradition to Dulles’ theory about secondary authorities that mediate the primary authority of Christ. The nineteenth-century neo-scholastic school already had a developed theological epistemology that included a structured system of secondary ecclesiastical authorities considered to be an adequate mediator of revelation.

It is of great importance that the Second Vatican Council discussed the Pope’s magisterial authority in the context of ecclesiology: the infallible authority of the Magisterium was perceived in relation with all the faithful (LG 12); the Magisterium was considered as belonging also to the bishops in communion with the pope, not just to the pope himself (LG 25); and the Council made clear that the Magisterium was merely the interpreter of the Word of God whether in its written form or in that of Tradition (DV 10). In the same place, the Council stated: „Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.” (DV 10) The specific configuration of these three mediators is the most important conciliar confirmation of Dulles’s model of pluralistic authority.

The third chapter offers further clarifications of the key concepts treated in the dissertation using the tools of fundamental theology. The Church’s social doctrine – as highlighted by Dulles – can help us define and clarify the concept of authority in social philosophy. After such clarification, it is worth discussing Dulles’s pluralistic authority model, which seeks to describe the relationship between the divine proto-authority and the secondary authorities that mediate it.

Also, the primary divine authority itself can be approached in various ways, as Dulles points out in his previously cited book *The Models of Revelation*. In the model that treats revelation as a „doctrine”, God acts as a witness that claims authority, in a certain sense, he acts as a teacher who, on the basis of this type of authority expects his word to be accepted. This form of authority is rooted in the omniscience of God, and in his wish for communicating knowledge. The model that treats revelation as „history” focuses on the great works of God’s salvation history, and the faithful receive the message of these works with confidence in the God of history. This form of authority is rooted in God’s omnipotence and capacity for action. According to the model based on „experience”, revelation arrives to humans as a direct inner experience. It is a direct encounter with the Holy One, which, according to Biblical and Patristic traditions, has a Christocentric character. The divine authority that mediates in this case is rooted in the mystical directness, the immanence of God. The „dialectic” model puts the emphasis on the fact that revelation arrives in Christ, the incarnate Word, who demands an existential response from man. No finite thing can be

revelation, only if the Word speaks by it. The divine authority mediating here is rooted in God's „verbal power” and transcendence. Finally, according to the model describing revelation as a „new state of mind”, a shift of perspective takes place in the believer that affects his/her interpretation of historical events. The form of authority involved here lies in the transformative presence of God's holiness. When Dulles presents the manifold richness of revelation through these models, he also tells us a lot about the complex nature of primary authority, and his analysis prepares the way for the mediation of revelation in history to be discussed.

Dulles revises the secondary authority-forms in the context of ecclesiology, as well. In his book mentioned earlier, *The Models of the Church*, the analysis of each church model is linked with the presentation of its respective authority pattern. The institutional model of the church (*societas*), treats the bishops as high-status leaders of a well-organized social group, and emphasizes the formal authority of pastoral office invested with power: their task is to lead the liturgy of the community, set the limits of acceptable doctrinal deviations, and formally represent the community. A model approaching the church as a mystical community (*communio*) emphasizes that the church must be united with God, and by the power of this grace, its members must form unity, too. In this context, the authority of a bishop is seen as having a co-ordinating, fraternal, animator role. According to the sacramental model (*sacramentum*), the church must display the continuing vigour of Christ's grace and the hope of salvation he promised in all its visible and symbolic aspects, especially in community prayer and worship. In this context, bishops take on the role of a consecrated mediator, and emphasis is not laid on their personality or managerial qualities, but on their cultic service. Considering the church as messenger of the Word (herald), it must first of all continue to preach the gospel and exhort people to believe in Jesus, their Lord and Savior. In this context, bishops are witnesses and teachers, whose rhetoric authenticity is to be tested. Finally, regarding the church as a servant (*diaconia*), it must contribute to the transformation of man's secular life and enrich the whole human society with the values of the kingdom of God. This ecclesiastical model corresponds to the figure of a socially sensitive bishop who plays an active role in public life too, Dulles says. Thus, different ecclesiastical models attract different authority models that could have a tense relationship, but basically, it is their complementary nature that prevails. The chapter concludes with a description summarizing the nature of „epistemic authority” that plays a central role in the dissertation.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation gives a systematically arranged account of the subjects of the church's teaching mission. The American theologian interprets the official teaching authority within the church community and in the service of the church's mission. Accordingly, even when analysing individual authoritative organs of the Church, he is guided by the idea of the pluralistic model of authority-forms that are very different in nature, not interchangeable but constitute a single concentrated-ecclesiology when put together. The chapter first presents the Pope and the bishops in communion with him as the supreme authority of the Magisterium, and then examines how this entity exercises its power through the structure of various ecclesiastical bodies. Dulles pays special attention to the study of the theological role played by the Roman Curia, the College of Cardinals, the Episcopal Synod, and the Regional Episcopal Conferences. Dulles also talks about the „magisterium” of theologians which is an issue that he was very much concerned about in all his professional career specially because of the complicated relationship between theology as an academic discipline and the teaching mission of the ecclesiastical offices, and it is also raised here. One of the most evident testimonies of the theological development of the author is the fact that in the third period of his career Dulles redefined his dual magisterium theory that he had formulated in the first. Finally, it is the authority of the consensus of the faithful, and the

faith-infallibility of the whole community of the faithful that derives from the individual sense of faith, which highlights the integrative nature of Dulles's theological view.

The fifth chapter of the dissertation discusses the hermeneutics of magisterial declarations. The previous chapters demonstrated the great emphasis Dulles placed on presenting the complex relationship between revelation and ecclesiastical teaching and the idea of symbolic mediation. This is the way the American theologian illustrates the specific nature of divine self-communication. The mystery contained in revelation is also displayed in the form of organised, official teaching mediated by ecclesiastical authority structures. The pluralistic model of ecclesiastical authority helps the interpretation of this mediation process seen in the perspective of history and the evolution of doctrine. Dulles was particularly interested to see how controversial aspects of identity and relevance can prevail in the doctrinal development process of salvation history. The chapter also sets out the methods of exercising ecclesiastical authority and its spheres as it is reflected in Dulles's theology of Magisterium. The theological description of the charisma of office assigned to different types of ecclesiological authority-forms is of key importance to discuss related issues. When is it possible to speak of the special charisma of infallibility that is more than the general assistance of the Holy Spirit supporting the Magisterium? The sphere of competence of a given charisma of office associated with different manifestations of teaching authority must also be carefully clarified. How can we define the domain of activity of the Magisterium concerning „faith and morals”? Dulles, in the course of his theologian career, explored several times the old-new problem of necessary discernment between primary and secondary subjects of infallibility. His observations are at the heart of the issue discussed in the dissertation. After theoretical systematization, it is inspiring to study the statements Dulles made in the category of „secondary subjects of infallibility”.

The sixth chapter of the dissertation reviews the processes of reception related to the practice of ecclesiastical authority on the basis of Dulles's publications. According to him, the archetype of all „receptions” is faith as reception, in other words one's relationship with the primary authority (Christ). It is only then that he discusses the manifold processes of reception associated with the secondary ecclesiastical authority. The dissertation follows the same logical order: it discusses the reception of revelation as divine self-communication before examining the responses given in the reception to different degrees of ecclesiastical teaching. In different parts of this chapter we find a recurring topic: the problem of possible deadlocks or confusion in reception processes. Can deadlocks produce good fruits? Do they possibly motivate learning? Or do they play a destructive role in the life of the church? In the first two periods of his career, Dulles was more inclined to give a positive answer the question, while in the third, he was more inclined to respond negatively.

The closing of the dissertation is structured around seven points, each of them summarizing Dulles's previously described fundamental theological views that inspired and shaped the author's work on the theology of ecclesiastical authority. These fundamental theological views are as follows:

(1) The neo-scholastic understanding of Magisterium does not adequately reflect the normative testimony of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition; therefore, the biblical-patristic foundation should receive more attention in the re-discussion of the Magisterium.

(2) The neo-scholastic approach does not adequately take into consideration the diversity of data of theology history nor the historical consciousness of late modern man, so it needs to be updated also in this respect.

(3) The notion of „pastoral office” can be (and should be) deepened if neo-scholastic theology of the Magisterium is placed into the context of communion ecclesiology, and it is interpreted as in mutual relationship with the whole church.

(4) The special charisma of infallibility (*infallibilitas*) working in solemn acts of the Magisterium can be interpreted and understood in general, pneumatological context of infallibility of the church as a whole.

(5) In a more restricted and sacramental sense, Christ's primary teaching authority is conveyed only by the hierarchical Magisterium, but there is another – clearly distinguished but not isolated from the former – type of „magisterium”, that of the theologian community in communion with the church, attached to the former as vital function of the Church.

(6) Although in the neo-scholastic period the exercise of ecclesiastical authority was characterized by the intention of artificial uniformization of theological discourse, Catholic plurality in space and time has always been an integral part of ecclesiastical life, which does not contradict the unity of faith.

(7) The reinterpretation of the theology of the Magisterium is not merely a theoretical question, as it has decisive influence on the style of practicing teaching authority.

Based on the above, it is worth evaluating the pluralistic model of church authority as it is represented by Dulles. These seven discernments serve not only as a guideline to review the mindset of the cardinal analysed in this dissertation in diacronic sense, but also, they form, in synchronic sense, the spiritual pillars of the fundamental theological synthesis he developed towards the end of his life.