

THE *NOS PAPISTAE* OF THOMAS MORE

(John Headley replies)

Slogans and tags die hard. It is only in the effort, perhaps vain, to slay one of them that I can justify returning to the question of More's ecclesiology.

The term in question is «papist». In composing the introduction to the *Responsio ad Lutherum*, I was well aware of the word's implications and thought to have made my intention painfully clear in the *Moreana* article. Admittedly the effort at clarification was hardly helped by the omission of two lines in the printing of the critical paragraph despite the appropriate corrections made in the galleys. May I take this opportunity to have it properly rendered here?

. . . the imputing of papist . . . to More never appears on 5, 770–71 or anywhere else in my treatment of More's ecclesiology. Although the careless reader might claim, particularly in the light of an earlier statement (cf. 5, 769), that such was the implication of the author's argument, Marius moves with breathtaking legerdemain from non-fact and implication¹ to the Real Presence of the term in my introduction and proceeds to lecture the now bewildered and increasingly pained author that those eyes he had believed to be open to historical anachronisms must not be shut "against the variety and multiform character of the past" (8, 1315).

To understand More's concept of the church nothing is so obfuscating and irrelevant as to call him a papist. Not even the the label of conciliarist impairs our understanding of the problem so much as papist, which is born of a polemical context and points to a post-Tridentine ecclesiology. All this is well known to Richard Marius whose rebuke for my using the term is rehearsed here by Francis Oakley.

If all of us are opposed to the application of «papist» to More's ecclesiology, how then did the term rear its ugly head in our consideration of the problem? The authority for its tentative and qualified use is very good indeed: More himself in the *Responsio*. As his argument against Luther moves toward its climax in the expanded H gathering of the Rosseus version, More finds the label of papist pressed upon what he had always recognized as being the common, known church. While affirming several times by his *quam tu vocas* that the label is of Luther's devising, he will in an act of defiance for polemical purposes and with an ironic twist affirm that «we papists» in the interpretation of scripture have the support

of the fathers (182-4). Shortly afterwards More will present his great affirmation of papal primacy and the see of Peter as the ecclesiastical touchstone.

Thus read in context More's expression of *Nos papistae* (5, 182/20) occurring under polemical pressure, has reference to a dramatic moment of recognition on his part and not to any final understanding of the church's constitution as the later connotation of the term might suggest. Certainly this dramatic, almost existential, recognition by More of the church's identity has its constitutional implications in his ecclesiology. Driven against his will by Luther's arguments, he comes to see Rome as more than an administrative convenience: the Papacy gives identity and continuity to the Church in time and in this sense More's church is papist. But the epithet cannot be inflated to a full constitutional theory wherein curial authority obscures and stifles the integral role of a council and submerges the consensus of the common, known church. On the other hand this term, born of polemic, cannot be simply discounted, for in allowing it to be temporarily imposed upon him, More began that line of logic, worked out in the Counter-Reformation, whereby, if the old church was to be preserved at all, it must submit to an ever greater degree of centralization around the papal office.

Something had happened. The world was not to be the same after the event of Luther, the founding father of the papist church.

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NOTE

1. Editor's note. The sentence missing in *Moreana* no. 41, p. 5, goes from «implication» to «implication». Pardon us for the fact that the emendation comes this late.