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In its mission to proclaim the gospel the Church has the obligation and the competence to make declarations in matters of faith. This involves the whole people of God among whom some may perceive certain aspects of the saving truth more clearly than others. At times this results in conflict and debate in which customs, accepted positions, beliefs, formulations and practices may be shown to be inadequate, mistaken or even inconsistent with the gospel. When conflict endangers the unity of the Church or threatens to distort the gospel the Church must have some effective means for resolving it.

In both our traditions bishops have a special responsibility for promoting truth and discerning error. The interaction of bishop and people in its exercise is a safeguard of Christian life and fidelity. There is a day-to-day exercise of this responsibility which concerns the teaching of the faith and the ordering of life in the Christian community. Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that those who have a specific responsibility in the community will be automatically free from errors of judgment, will not tolerate abuses and will not distort the truth. No initiative or reaction on the part of any members of the community is exempt from the possibility of such failures. Despite the absence of this guarantee, we believe that Christ will not abandon his Church and that the Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth. Therefore we are confident in Christian hope that such failures will not destroy the Church's ability to proclaim the gospel and to show forth the Christian life. That is why the Church, in spite of its failures, can be described as indefectible.

We believe that the Church, in times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question, can make authoritative judgments. When the Church meets in general council, its decisions, consonant with Scripture, exclude what is erroneous. Though not exhaustive, they clarify the Church's understanding of the truth without adding to it. By the Holy Spirit, the Church commits itself to them, recognising that the same Spirit has protected them from error. Therefore their authority is such that, whatever further clarification or interpretation may be proposed, the truth they express will always be confessed. This authority is ascribed in both our traditions to decisions of the ecumenical councils of the first centuries.

Since our historical divisions, the Roman Catholic Church has continued the practice of holding general councils of its bishops. The churches of the Anglican Communion have developed other forms of conciliarity. The present convergence of our churches will open the way to councils which both will recognise as ecumenical.