

ARCIC 158/c

Critical Analysis of the ARCIC Statement
on
"Authority in the Church"

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Structure of the document

1) This is determined by its purpose - to show in what terms Catholics and Anglicans can set down together their common faith about the existence, nature, forms and conditions of exercise of an authority in the Church, starting from the shared conviction that there is no other authority, whether of the Church or in the Church, than that of Christ himself, exercised ministerially by men.

2) The method adopted is inductive. It starts from facts evident at various stages of the Church's life, and tries to discern on the one hand their continuity with the order of the christian community in the apostolic age, and on the other hand the developments called for by the expansion and institutional growth of the Church through the ages, in changing historical circumstances and within different cultures. Following this path the statement is constantly concerned to show the identity, or the proximity, or the convergence of the views commonly accepted within each communion.

An important feature of the method is that it scrupulously avoids the technical language of the schools: the consensus sought for bears on the faith itself, and not on different possible theological interpretations or adaptations to a system.

3) The plan of the document

The introduction (#1) fixes firmly the starting point: our common faith in the Lordship of Christ, from whom all exercise of Church authority comes through the gift of the Spirit.

The first part deals with the authority of the christian community as a whole, beginning from the apostolic community which, through the light of the Holy Spirit has recognised the saving action of Christ and its own mission to proclaim this good news to the whole world (#2). From this the whole community derives a responsibility which, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit creates mutual obligations between its different parts (#3).

The second part treats of authority in the Church, at the service of these mutual obligations. There is first an allusion to the authority which comes from holiness of life. (#4) But authority derives also from special gifts given by the Holy Spirit so that the Church may discharge her mission; among these, the gift of episkope conferred on ordained ministers. (#5) Responsibility for oversight is not a monopoly of the latter: the community as a whole shares in it when it exercises discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whether responding with docility or with constructive criticism. (#6) In any case authority, assumed ministerially by men, can never be exercised in the Church in a way which reflects adequately the authority of Christ himself. (#7)

The third part looks at the exercise of authority as serving the communion between churches. The key word here is koinonia, first defined separately and in general terms (#8) then viewed in relation to two principal forms of the exercise of authority: (a view which allows the term to be used consistently) a collective form, conciliarity (#9) and a more personal form, the primatial. The emergence of the latter in the course of history is first brought out (#10) then its exercise within a restricted group of local churches (#11) and finally its exercise on a world-wide and universal level: the primacy of Rome. (#12)

The fourth part considers the exercise of authority in relation to its principal object: the safeguarding of the faith - and of the same faith for everybody. The importance for koinonia of communion in professing the truth is underlined. (#13) In the course of history this truth has found expression in creeds, conciliar utterances and the like. (#14) It must be communicated in a way which will be understood by those who are to receive and practice it and this calls for continual adaptation to the ways of understanding of different times and cultures. (15) Throughout all those different modes of transmission the truth must remain faithful to itself: this has been assured by councils whose authority cannot be contested once their decisions, expressing the apostolic faith, have been received as such by the whole community at all its levels. (#16) In the history of this recognition of councils, the reception and sanction given them by the see of Rome has played an important part. (#17)

The mandate of authority is, very specifically, to maintain the Church in the truth. This is achieved by the interplay of two forces - primatial authority and the common understanding of the faithful. This interaction, which depends on the general guidance of the Holy Spirit, is necessary by reason of the weakness and liability to sin of those who exercise authority. (#18)

The fifth part examines the relations which should exist between the conciliar and primatial exercises of authority. The ecumenical councils are dealt with first (#19), then the necessarily collective character of all primatial authority (#20) which should not seek uniformity (#21) hence the need for a just balance between the two forms (#22) which should be realised also on the higher plane of the koinonia of all the Churches. (#23)

The sixth part, the last, begins with the problems raised by the previous considerations on authority and its exercise. The joint commission is convinced it has reached a basic consensus on these matters but recognises that the consensus carries with it certain reserves.

a) Catholics give in general a meaning to the petrine texts of scripture which seems to go beyond what they will objectively bear: this is the Anglican view, but would be shared by many Catholic exegetes today.

b) The expression 'divine right' which the Catholic Church says is the foundation of the primacy of the see of Rome, can be understood in two different ways only one of which is declared admissible; it remains for the Catholic Church to declare itself on the meaning of this expression, because on it depends the restoration of unity between the two parties in this dialogue.

c) the notion of the infallibility of the bishop of Rome presents a difficulty in the eyes of Anglicans; they have been reminded not to overlook the limits and conditions which both Vatican councils have placed on its exercise.

d) the same must be said of the immediate universal jurisdiction of the pope; but Anglicans are asked not to lose sight of the purpose governing the exercise of this jurisdiction, nor of the effort within the Church since Vatican II to replace the juridical conception of this form of papal responsibility with a more pastoral one. (#24)

Finally looking at 'prospects', the statement draws a first conclusion from what has gone before; there is a convergence between the Catholic and Anglican views of authority and the forms and conditions of its exercise. Together with the two statements previously submitted for the approval of the respective authorities - those on Eucharist and Ministry - the present document allows us to hope that a solution of the remaining difficulties is possible. (#25)

By way of conclusion the statement is submitted to the judgement and approval of the authorities of the two communions in the expectation, not only that the measure of agreement already achieved will be ratified by them but that, on this basis, they will take measures to promote a closer sharing of the two communions in the life, worship and mission of the Church (#26 - "the next step".)

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II. Overall Appreciation

The document commends itself for these reasons

a) Its exclusively biblical language, which avoids any particular theological interpretation of the two key-words used: episkope and koinonia.

b) The scrupulously progressive character of the argument, which leads us as though by the hand from the Lordship of Christ (the foundation of all authority whether of or in the Church) to a universal primacy of the see of Rome, without omitting on the way any of the stages in the structure of the exercise of authority in the Church. There is also a clear concern to take the Holy Spirit as model and as guide on the way.

c) Its concern to leave nothing out of account in considering authority, whether of its different depositaries (the faithful, ordained ministers, bishops, patriarchs, councils, the bishop of Rome) its different grounds (holiness of life, special gifts of the Holy Spirit, ordination) or its different levels (local, regional, universal).

d) Throughout it rightly associates the christological and the pneumatological aspects of the exercise of authority: the former is strongly emphasised by the basic reference to the lordship of Christ, but this lordship is shown to be exercised in the Church only through the action of the Holy Spirit.

e) The place given to scripture and tradition as necessary points of reference for all exercise of authority in its object and in its manner. At the same time the idea of tradition itself seems less worked out than in a previous draft of the document - perhaps for fear of putting too narrow a theological interpretation on it.

f) Its concern to bring out the eminently pastoral purpose of the exercise of authority: the two-fold responsibility of episkope (in its various forms and at its various levels) to safeguard the faith in its apostolic authenticity and, on the basis of that, to maintain the local and universal koinonia.

To sum up: A first reading of the document produces a most favourable impression: that of a very fine and vigorous theological synthesis likely to persuade the Anglican on sound grounds, in view of the mission of the Church, that a universal ministry of episkope rests traditionally with the bishop of Rome. In this respect one cannot hesitate to call the paper remarkable. None the less, as in the council debates not long ago, to this valde placet we have to add our attamen, suggesting some reserves. In fact both because of its method, little known in Catholic theology, and because of some of its assertions, the document is likely at first reading to provoke some astonishment. Hence the pointers which I shall now offer for a just assessment.

Indications for an Evaluation

a) Clearly one cannot judge the value of this document merely by the fact that it is likely to create astonishment. It was a good thing that the compilers should take care to express themselves in a way not open to misinterpretation, but it was not reasonable to expect that the document itself should carry a clear and total justification of everything it puts forward as a truth. This is not its purpose, and its value cannot be fairly appreciated unless we realise its proper place or scope. It is a stage in the dialogue between two definite communions, the Anglican and the Roman Catholic;

and the aim is, very specifically, to bring out what these have in common as convictions of faith about the conception and exercise of authority in the Church, as the Lord intended to establish it and have it live. The statement sets out then from these shared convictions, laid down as so many facts which there is no need to make good since they are sufficiently manifest and recognised.

b) Further, if some passages of the document can be singled out as objects of the possible astonishment I mentioned earlier, these passages are not in themselves enough to account for the astonishment. For the most part it will be caused by a regrettable lack of information about the amount of progress in theological research within the Catholic Church. It needs to be remembered that long before Vatican II many of the most authoritative Catholic theologians, those most conscious of the demands of sound method, were already scrutinising the acts of the most important councils, particularly Trent and Vatican I, and had begun to disentangle rigorously the precise sense of the texts promulgated as these had been discussed, understood and intended by the council fathers themselves. Ecumenical collaboration, of which the document we are considering is a fruit, has undoubtedly stimulated this sort of research, enriching it without necessarily setting it on wrong lines. In any case the statement takes account of the fruits of such research only to the extent that they are matter of agreement between our respective communions, since it is concerned only with their dialogue. That there are elements of conjecture and anticipation in handling such material is something that needs to be borne in mind in an objective assessment. What follows should be read in the light of these two preliminary observations.

1. The character of the method used

The document has no need to justify faith in the lordship of Christ or in the active and efficacious presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church: it starts from convictions of faith indisputably shared by our two communions on these fundamental points. At each of its stages it shows a growth in awareness, on either side, of what both sides discern as following from these primary convictions, on the basis of the witness of scripture.

Such a proceeding is characteristic of the "inductive" method which sets out from known facts to arrive at principles. It is a method which certainly risks astonishing not only the simple faithful but also many bishops who were catechised or taught theology in the opposite way: starting from texts presented as 'authorities' (scripture or documents of the magisterium) the truths to be believed and the virtues to be practised were deduced. On the assumption that the total content of revelation was clearly known to the apostles, the conclusion drawn was that the New Testament contained, at least implicitly, the theoretical and practical forms which the Roman Catholic Church, in the course of time and under pressure of circumstances but helped by the Holy Spirit and always by way of a homogeneous, deductive development of doctrine, had been led to give to its exercise of authority. Hence the scriptural foundation (the petrine texts) put forward, as fully normative, for the universal primacy of jurisdiction and the doctrinal infallibility of the bishop of Rome, sanctioned as dogmatic truths by conciliar definitions. It is difficult to imagine that those who have received this kind of teaching will not be somewhat abashed by the different method of the document, being led to think that the abandonment of the deductive method, which is regarded as traditional, entails ipso facto the abandonment of its conclusions.

In fact, to oppose so sharply the inductive method of our document and the deductive method hitherto current in catechesis and theological teaching would be to see neither in its full reality. If the inductive method is more manifest in the statement and the deductive in the kind of teaching hitherto dominant, in neither case is one used exclusively. If the statement starts from a consideration of the historical development of the forms of exercise of primacy in the Church, it none the less justifies the authority which invests these forms by an appeal to the normative data of scripture. Conversely, if traditional teaching of theology in the Catholic Church starts straight off from scripture texts, it justifies the weight it gives to the texts by recourse to the interpretation given in the living tradition since the apostles - something which is itself an established fact and the object of historical development. It turns out that there is still

a deductive element inherent in the inductive method followed by the statement, and in turn an inductive element in the 'traditional' deductive way. In either case the point of departure and the foundation of authority in the Church is certainly the mandate given by Christ and witnessed to in scripture; not the community itself, whose role and duty is on the contrary to recognise it. A passage in the document makes this clear:

"This service of the Church, officially entrusted only to ordained ministers, is intrinsic to the Church's structure according to the mandate given by Christ and recognised by the community." (#5)

2. Is the episcopate of the esse of the Church?

It should be emphasised that the lines just quoted are particularly important if they imply recognition by the Anglican members of the Commission that the sacramental hierarchical structure of the Church is necessary to the 'esse' of the Church and not merely to its 'bene esse'- and this by virtue not of a decision of the Christian community, the Church itself, but of a mandate given by Christ. It goes without saying that the agreement the Commission says it has reached cannot be regarded as such if there is any ambiguity in interpreting this passage. It is known that these two expressions, esse and bene esse (or again plene esse) are characteristic of two theological currents which Anglican comprehensiveness welcomes equally, seeming to give them only a secondary importance not concerned with the faith itself: a position which does not correspond with that of the Catholic Church. Assuming that the Anglican members of the commission have fully agreed on the interpretation of the passage quoted, it remains to be seen whether it will be accepted in that sense by the Anglican authorities.

Do Luther's suggestions in the document for the 'esse' of the Church? - a

3. The balance between the primatial and the 'conciliar' elements in the exercise of authority.

a) Responsibility or power?

Even a careful reading of the document may give the impression that in talking of the exercise of authority it speaks oftener and more readily of responsibility than of power (potestas). This may well surprise those who do not regard the two notions as identical. It goes without saying that every exercise of power implies responsibility in him who exercises it. But the converse is not self-evident.

The moral notion of responsibility evokes directly that of duty: it does not of itself imply any power more than a simple ability to act or a legitimate power of decision - and these do not establish a right to be obeyed.

Nevertheless this idea of power linked to the exercise of authority and serving as its basis is not entirely absent from the document: we read for example -

|| "Ordained ministers commissioned to discern these insights and give authoritative expression to them are part of the community, sharing its quest for understanding the gospel in obedience to Christ and receptive to the needs and concerns of all ." (#6)

From this passage it can be deduced that, while the community as a whole, clergy and laity (the pleroma of the Church, as our orthodox brethren like to call it) share responsibility in the search for the whole authentic content of the gospel, they do not share power to give authoritative expression to the results of this search because this has been given only to ordained ministers - and this so much so that it can be called essential to the structure of the Church as was recalled earlier. This holds particularly for the bishop, as is borne out by the passage of the document quoted previously. This point is clear enough then on the plane of local primacy. It will be seen that it is less so with the higher levels of the exercise of primacy.

b) Interaction between the primatial and conciliar elements

The document speaks several times of a necessary interaction between the primatial and conciliar elements in the exercise of authority. The idea of primacy does not come in however except in connection with assuring koinonia between local churches, whether regionally or universally. But then the distinction so clearly made between responsibility and power when talking of the koinonia which exists within a single local church, because of ordination and the mandate which derives from it, no longer appears so clearly.

The bishop of a more important church, to whom the neighbouring bishops entrust a particular care for safeguarding their mutual koinonia, certainly takes on thereby a new responsibility, but it is hard to see how, since he receives no new ordination, he can receive a new power of discernment coming from Christ and demanding obedience.

There is a difficulty here which the document does not face squarely. Undoubtedly, as it well says, the charism of episkope which the bishop receives at his ordination is intended to safeguard koinonia not only within his own local church but between it and the other local churches. This may be why the statement does not bother to remind us that this same charism ipso facto empowers the primate to carry out his primatial function. But it would have been better to repeat this in so many words; the more so since it is not only of great interest but also raises a serious difficulty when we come to deal with safeguarding the universal koinonia.

c) Regional koinonia and universal koinonia

I have drawn attention above to the predominantly inductive character of the method followed by the Commission in this document. This is especially in evidence when it comes to the historical emergence of a primacy of the bishop of Rome at the service of the universal koinonia - taking further the development which had led to the setting up of regional primacies and being modelled on them. The advantage of this line of approach is that it emphasises that the accession of the bishop of Rome to a universal primacy is no more bound up with a new ordination than is the access of any bishop to a regional primacy: there is no need therefore to look for any other sacramental basis for the primacy of the bishop of Rome than the charism of episkope that he received at his episcopal ordination. The drawback - apart from the risk of blurring the chronological perspective - is that to assimilate the emergence of universal primacy to that of regional primacies is to make it appear, like them, the result of a simple delegation of powers by local churches, a delegation which does not of itself demand a particular mandate from on high. The powers of a regional primate are in fact strictly limited by the terms devised and agreed upon by the bishops of his primacy, himself included.

There is in some sense a voluntary limitation of sovereignty, canonically ratified, in the interests of regional koinonia. Thus the Catholic Church customarily says that the establishment of a regional primacy belongs to ecclesiastical law. It would not be ready to grant that the same is altogether true for the universal primacy: the first Vatican council declares this to be of divine right, since it is to the mandate explicitly given by Christ to Peter that the Church refers the powers she recognises in the bishop of Rome, to feed the whole flock and confirm it in the faith.

The Commission has not overlooked this difficulty. In an earlier draft it was content to point it out briefly. In the final text it wisely devotes a special paragraph to setting out those respective confessional standpoints on which so far agreement has not been reached. I shall come back to these later. But since agreement is not complete, it would have been better not to write -

"What we have written here amounts to a consensus on authority in the Church and, in particular, on the basic principles of primacy" (#24)

The phrase 'consensus on authority' is to say the least awkward here, since it suggests that agreement is acknowledged on everything concerning authority in the Church, and this is not born out by what is in the document. But this misunderstanding is aggravated by what follows : " in particular on the basic principles of primacy", since here again it is not on all the basic principles that there is agreement but only on some: on the historical emergence of a form of primatial authority and on the necessity for a certain interaction, in its exercise, of conciliar and primatial elements. Even this is completely true only for regional primacies; for the universal primacy it is only partially true as we shall see, and in fact this is touched on in the document.

It is true, of course, that among the basic principles on which the document registers real agreement we can include (though it is there only in very general terms) the effective action of the Holy Spirit in leading the pleroma of the Church towards the whole truth, and giving ordained ministers their proper mandate to which is attached a corresponding power.

No doubt it was this consideration that allowed the Catholic members to subscribe to the assertion that the agreement achieved on the basic principles of universal primacy - though it is yet only partial - allows the remaining difficulties to be confronted with well-founded hope of overcoming them. Moreover, in the end the statement does not speak of consensus nor of identity of views, but of convergence: and this convergence is undeniable. It would have been enough to modify somewhat the phrase I have criticised, to prevent its giving grounds for unfortunate misunderstanding linked with an obvious inconsistency. To be sure well-informed readers, bishops or theologians, will not misunderstand. But the general run of the faithful, depending mainly on incompetent journalists, risk having their hopes raised prematurely and then being equally rapidly disappointed; this would be a pity since there is no ground for disappointment.

4. Remaining Difficulties and prospects of solution

We should be grateful to the Commission for having set out the remaining difficulties candidly and clearly, while sketching the lines of further research which may reveal fresh convergences on these very points. These difficulties form the subject of the long paragraph #24. I merely summarise them without entering into discussion of them. They are mainly concerned with the authority of the bishop of Rome: the basis generally assigned to it in Catholic teaching (the petrine texts, #24a) the nature of the right claimed for it (divine right, #24b) , the extent of its scope (infallibility #24c; universal and immediate jurisdiction #24d). There is a vast field still to be explored here. In the shape of pointers to further research, and perhaps even the beginnings of a solution, the Commission draws attention to certain easily established facts:

- a) a greater concern for precision among many Catholic exegetes in interpreting the petrine texts of the New Testament.
- b) the not very clear meaning of the expression divine right, which comes of distinguishing it too sharply from ecclesiastical right (and indeed we cannot ignore the fact that, if the action of the Holy Spirit is seen as the chief motive force in the life of the Church, even in the development

of its institutions, there is always a certain divine origin even in an 'ecclesiastical' right or law; conversely, there is always an element of the human in the emergence of an authority which we call de jure divino).

c/d) As for the infallibility of the bishop of Rome and the extent of his immediate jurisdiction, a more rigorous study of the council texts themselves as they were discussed, understood and intended by the fathers who decreed them is likely (as I said earlier) to strip them of the too simplistic and absolute meanings they were subsequently given, inside or outside the Catholic Church. This kind of study allowed Vatican II to make important "aggiornamenti".

It may be regretted that the Commission, no doubt in its hurry to complete the statement, confined itself to these over-brief indications. It would have been easy to show how and in what measure the considerations contained in the report and the method which inspired it already provide noteworthy elements for further progress in convergence. But in any case this will be the subject of further work.

In a final paragraph the Commission looks back at its own history and at the work it has achieved since it undertook to dispel the theological obstacles blocking the way to the restoration of full communion between our Churches. There are three landmarks on the way: the agreement on the Eucharist (Windsor 1971) that on Ministry (Canterbury 1973) and now the statement on Authority (Venice 1976).

The Commission also notes the happy results of adopting a method whose character and use have been continually refined with experience. I am glad to quote their testimony to the satisfaction they feel, since I share it:

"In spite of the difficulties just mentioned, we believe that this Statement on Authority in the Church represents a significant convergence with far-reaching consequences. For a considerable period theologians in our two traditions, without compromising their respective allegiances, have worked on common problems with the same methods. In the process they have come to see old problems in new horizons and have experienced a theological convergence which has often taken them by surprise." (#25).

Nevertheless the reserves I have expressed here raise the question whether the method they agreed to use answered entirely, in principle or in application, to the demands of the problem: authority in the Church. To be sure, it is important that we agree in recognising that every bishop, in virtue of his ordination, receives from the Holy Spirit the promise of effective assistance in carrying out his duty and exercising his power of episkope to safeguard the koinonia of which he has charge: In recognising too that it is in virtue of his episkope that every primate fulfils his responsibilities and discharges his primatial tasks. But all this is not enough to give an account of the nature of universal primacy or of the guarantee of very special assistance which allows and conditions its exercise. Catholic doctrine on this point cannot be securely founded merely on the fact of the historical emergence of a universal primacy, nor on the fact of its recognition by the community during the centuries before the great schisms, nor yet on the appeal to a "scientific" exegesis of scripture. The Catholic affirmation rests on intimate conviction that the authority of the Lord of the Church himself has been entrusted to the apostolic college, and within it by a special title to Peter, to continue to be exercised visibly and ministerially by their successors with the indefectible light and prompting of the Holy Spirit. This is not, for the Roman Catholic Church, the expression or conclusion of a particular theology (even if a particular theology has been worked out about it and is for that reason open to objective criticism) but an intimate and immediate conviction of faith.

It is against this that all work done from an ecumenical standpoint is liable in the end to come up - the quicker the more advanced it is. Such work has great value in demolishing obstacles for those who do not yet share this conviction of faith: the present document is a remarkable example of this. But the final adherence to the teaching of the Catholic Church on this point will always have to be an adherence of faith with the irreducible mystery that this carries with it. Certainly respect for truth and even the safeguarding of it may suggest and perhaps demand various alterations, since human weakness leaves the way open to abuses; on these grounds also the document is valuable since

it compels us to look facts in the face. But this will be done on the basis of the adherence of faith, and with respect for its character. This consideration is at the heart of the problem of authority in the Church.

III

Conclusion

Here (#26) the Commission looks forward to a final phase of its work, which will bring together in one document the statements on eucharist, ministry and authority.

The respective authorities will then be asked to judge whether the statements really express their faith on these important matters. But before the final editing, this third part will have to have (like the others) the benefit of wider criticism in theological circles.

The former statements were published with this end in view. There should be no question of doing otherwise with the present statement. Unquestionably, competent authority will want to know the reactions of the faithful at large before pronouncing itself. To act otherwise than with the previous statements would be to ask that authority's decision should anticipate the reactions of the faithful, bishops and theologians. This would be to go against the content of the document, which justly insists on the necessity of sharing responsibility in the search for truth and on the timely interaction of the primatial and conciliar elements in the exercise of authority in the Church. This accords with the ideas of co-responsibility and collegiality which were restored to their proper place at Vatican II. For the moment then there can be no question of giving more than an overall appreciation of the interest of these declarations, while studies open the way to a new stage of the journey in which profit will be drawn from an already rich experience.

The cause of ^cecumenism is too urgent to risk halting progress by ill-considered haste.