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AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

Canon Professor Geoffrey Lampe (Cambridge University)

The Synod must surely be unanimous in its welcome to the spirit in which the Joint Commission has done its work and the remarkable degree of unity which has emerged. For this actual document, however, I think our welcome should be more cautious.* ^{see page 4} It leaves so many questions unanswered that I wish the Churches had not been asked to consider it until the Commission had done more work on it.

The first 18 of its paragraphs are wonderfully encouraging. It is perhaps a pity that it so often uses the Greek word koinonia to mean 'community'; scholars are generally agreed that in the New Testament it is not used in that concrete sense: it means 'participation'. This is not just pedantry. Greek words can easily disguise important ambiguities. Episcope, which also appears here, may mean either 'oversight' or 'the office of a bishop'. We know what confusion has resulted from that double meaning. Koinonia may denote the community of faith, the people of God, or it might suggest the Church as a structured, juridically conceived, organisation. In fact, however, such ambiguity as there is in these first paragraphs attaches to the concept of 'bishop of a principal see' or 'primate'. For by a kind of sleight of hand these terms soon turn out to refer exclusively to the Bishop of Rome as universal primate. But there are other principal sees, and other primates and patriarchs. It is very unfortunate that the report totally ignores the patriarchal sees of the Eastern Churches.

However, the primacy of the Roman see is set out here in a form which we could all accept. The Petrine texts are virtually

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jettisoned; so is the idea, enshrined in Canon 28 of Chalcedon, that the primacy rests on the secular status of the city of Rome. Instead, it is grounded as it already was in the second century, on the seniority and prestige of the Church in Rome with its association with Peter and Paul. This is very good; so is the insistence that the primacy of the Pope rests on his being the bishop of the local Church of Rome -- which means that he must naturally be expected to be an Italian.

But all this part of the report implies a stupendous revolution: much more drastic than anything in the sixteenth century. Primacy, as here described, is quite incompatible with the Pope's universal immediate jurisdiction. It means no more encyclicals like Humanae vitae. We are bound to ask, 'Is it all too good to be true?'

Unfortunately, the later paragraphs suggest that at present this may still be so. As a minor point, it is a pity that the Church is described as indefectible (para.18) when what is clearly meant is that God is faithful, and, being faithful, will not desert his Church. More important: Para.15 tells us that conciliar formulas are capable of being improved, restated, and revised as to their categories of thought and modes of expression. Yet para.19 reverts to the old, and most unsatisfactory, distinction between defined dogma and other doctrinal formulations; and, in respect of dogma, councils, it is claimed, are preserved from error. Did our representatives make no mention of Article XXI: General Councils 'may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God'? We simply cannot all agree to para.19. And 20 is worse, for although its meaning is not immediately clear it seems to imply recognition of the authority of the Pope to define dogma. This will not do. The protests which were raised from end to end of our Church in 1950 when Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption de fide were right. If there were any doubt about the meaning of para.20, the infallibility of the Pope in defining dogma is explicitly reaffirmed 'for the Roman Catholic Church' in para.24(c), though not there with the agreement of the Anglicans.

Para.24 in fact shows that the Commission has left a formidable residue of unfinished business: the universal immediate jurisdiction of the Pope, which the earlier paragraphs on primacy would certainly seem to have excluded, appears as one among the outstanding problems. So does the vital question whether a Church that is not in communion with the Roman see is less than fully a Church.

I wish that we had not been presented with this report until the Joint Commission had done more work on these issues. In case anyone thinks that because I am critical of the report I am lukewarm about reunion, let me say that I believe the best way to tackle these great issues is together, in such unity as we can enjoy here and now. To my mind that means in a relationship of intercommunion officially sponsored and encouraged by the leadership of both Churches. To suppose that intercommunion has to wait upon full doctrinal agreement is surely an anachronistic idea. We have to live with pluriformity. In our own Church that has been made perfectly clear by the report Christian Believing. The Church of Rome is in a similar situation. There will be no more monolithic doctrinal confessions, to be mutually agreed in detail between Churches. But our Roman brethren and ourselves have fully enough in common, in faith and practice, to be able to seek the grace of our Lord in shared Communion for the much more extensive reappraisal of our beliefs about authority which lies ahead of us.

February 15, 1977

AMENDMENT TO PROFESSOR LAMPE'S SPEECH ON AUTHORITY

Page 1, line 4, after "cautious" insert:

The report is a failure, for two main reasons. 1) It is not about authority in the church. It is about who exercises it. The great prior theological question is: What is authority, especially in matters of belief? What is its source? What do we mean by revelation? What is the relation of revelation to doctrine? These questions are the divisive issue today which sometimes makes liberal Christianity and authoritarian Christianity look like two different religions. Until this has been explored there is little use in talking about councils and primates. 2) Even on the subject of primacy the report leaves so many questions unanswered...