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Authority: Consensus, No; Convergence, Yes

I REMEMBER once sitting in the Station Hotel in York at the time of an Anglican diocesan conference. One heard snatches of clerical tea-time conversation drifting across the room: the older groups were discussing finance, and the younger ones authority. Age and experience instill a sense of priorities, as the parish priest might say; or was it in that in those days authority could still be treated as an academic subject, a topic of conversation peculiarly suited to those who were hardly weaned from their books, with ordination just behind them?

Whatever the answer appropriate to those days, authority cannot any longer be treated as a subject to be studied once and then taken for granted. In law, government, education, morals as in church affairs, it is sought for and not found; 'Because I say so', is no longer a sufficient answer for anyone, even if the 'I' is the Church or the British Constitution and way of life.

The Agreed Statement on Authority in the Church from the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission must be read in the context of this contemporary search for a renewed grasp of the fundamental principles of civilized living. It is not just a matter of two churches agreeing to live in greater harmony or even to arrange a merger. What is at stake is our understanding of the whys and wherefores of the Christian religion: the strengthening of conviction, the clarifying of intelligence, the readiness and completeness of obedience. Can eighteen good men and true, the best that their respective churches could find, give us such a lead that we shall feel bound to

follow, so as to establish a single communion where at present there are two and to make the subject of our common faith recognisable as the unique source of human fulfilment?

Ten years have gone by since the first preparatory meeting at Gazzada in Northern Italy. Two documents have so far been published, on the Eucharist and on Ministry. Neither of these has yet been given any kind of officially accepted status, but both of them have been welcomed by Catholic theologians as statements which reveal much more common ground than we have shared in the past and at the same time adequately represent our own faith, when read in the context of the relevant documents of the Church.

The question in everybody's mind was: will the third document, on Authority, enable us to say that both sides accept that context? If we cannot agree on the sources to which the first two agreed statements refer, then we have achieved nothing more than a temporary fellow-feeling among theologians under the pressure of passing fashion. If we are to be one in faith, and not simply in theology, then we must come to the same understanding of the way in which that faith is called into being, nourished and maintained. Does this new document enable us to say that this point has been reached by this highly equipped, well run-in team of front-line researchers? Has the break-through been made?

The answer is 'Not Yet'. The statement speaks of a consensus; this may indeed have been reached by the commission members themselves at their Venice meeting, though it is notable that for the

first time they found it necessary to list four difficulties felt especially by Anglican members and not yet satisfactorily resolved for them by Catholic scholars. But it will not receive the same degree of support from Catholic theologians as did the other two documents, and so cannot be said to represent a consensus of a wider kind. 'Convergence', a word used three times in the penultimate paragraph, in which the word 'consensus' does not, incidentally, appear, would be much nearer the mark. Since that convergence includes some affirmations which, from the Anglican side, are both striking and generous, it is not by any means negligible, and is in fact full of promise for the future. But in various important respects the document is less satisfactory than its predecessors and is disappointingly less *au fait* with current theological progress outside the Commission.

The Preface, signed by the two Co-Chairmen, Bishop Clark and Bishop McAdoo, speaks of the distinction between the 'ideal' and 'the actual' as being an important one for the reading of the document and for an understanding of its method. Christ willed 'the ideal of the Church' and the Church 'has often failed to achieve this ideal'. One finds the Commission here falling at the outset into one of the oldest blunders in the ecumenical business. 'Ideal' and 'actual' are not terms that can be used appropriately of the Church of the New Testament. The whole point of Christ's work was that the ideal *was* the actual: that he established the Church, with all its human imperfections, as a permanent basis, and that it was precisely in the 'actual' Church that one found the 'ideal'. He did not give the Apostles a blueprint, telling them to get on with building according to a theoretical, drawing-board pattern. He gave them the Church itself and told them to go on building; the pattern would emerge later. The 'ideal' and 'actual' distinction has been responsible for most of the separations and divisions in the history of the Church, and it is hardly likely to help us to bridge them today.

The second flaw in the general tenor of the document is its subjectivity. One misses a sense of the given, of the objective facts which it must be the purpose of any scientific enquiry to discover. Much is said of the process by which discovery is made; less is affirmed about the way in which the finds got there in the first place. The first paragraph of the Introduction starts out by speaking of 'The Confession of Christ as Lord',

and so of man's response; in a document on authority, it would have been more appropriate to start from the initiative of God: The Revelation of Christ as Lord. We need to know clearly who the author was in the first place, and just how authoritative he is.

The third weakness consists in the apparent reluctance of the document to say anything of the direct relationship of the Church and its authority with the historic Christ. We are told that, through the work of the Spirit, the apostolic community 'came to recognise in the words and deeds of Jesus, the saving activity of God' and 'transmitted what they had heard and seen', but an essential step before that transmission is omitted, one that St Irenaeus, for example, the first great exponent of authority in the Church, is careful to include: the handing-on by Jesus himself of his message to the community which he had brought into being and which was in fact inseparable from that message: its living expression, the New Covenant now consummated between God and man. The Church was not an after-thought, not even an after-thought of the Holy Spirit, it was brought into existence by the Word; indeed, if we follow the Acts of the Apostles, it was that Word.

In paragraphs 5 and 6, the historic and functional link of the bishops with the apostolic college is similarly omitted. Their responsibility is not simply one of 'general oversight', 'discernment', and 'giving authentic expression'; as successors of the apostles, they safeguard the faith once delivered; to 'preserve the integrity of the *koinonia*' they are in the first place and above all servants of the Word of God, of the message from the preaching of which the community comes into being. One cannot say that a text in which this aspect of the bishops' rôle does not clearly emerge adequately represents the essentials of Catholic faith: no consensus here.

In section III, 'Authority in the Communion of the Churches', the ticklish problem of the Papacy is dealt with by starting from local churches and then working towards the universal *koinonia*. The explanations given of the historical development whereby the see of Rome 'eventually became the principal centre in matters concerning the Church universal' will do a great deal to clear away misconceptions; but the co-existence, so to speak, of local and universal church is not brought out sufficiently clearly. The first local church was, after all, also the universal Church;

the Church was already universal on the day of Pentecost. Although strictly speaking a local council, the Council of Jerusalem can also be regarded as universal, given the bearing of its decision; and it is significant that Peter was there. These points are obscured in what is said of the Council of Jerusalem in paragraph 9. It is not enough to say, as in paragraph 11, that 'the purpose of *koinonia* is the realization of the will of Christ', expressed in John 17; the *koinonia* is that realization; the purpose cannot be brought to fulfilment unless its achievement has already begun. For that reason, bishops do more than 'seek the fulfilment of the will of Christ' (n.9); they obey, and call upon others to obey, the already present, effective expression of that will.

Section IV, 'Authority in Matters of Faith', is very much the best part of the document; the apparent shying away from infallibility is repaired in Section V, where we are told that decisions of ecumenical councils on fundamental matters of faith 'exclude what is erroneous', and are 'protected from error'.

Matters Arising

When we reach Section VI, on 'Problems and Prospects', we are brought up rather sharply against some areas of incomprehension that do not so much undermine what has been said before — in which there is so much cause for gratitude and, indeed, rejoicing — as make one think how much better the document could so easily have been. This section lists four problems still to be resolved. The first concerns the use of the Petrine texts in Scripture to support Roman claims. Here we are left with the vague statement, astonishing in its feebleness, that 'many Roman Catholic scholars do not now feel it necessary to stand by former exegesis of these texts in every respect'. The Commission presents the whole thing in terms of the long out-moded style of partisan controversy and appears to be unaware of the long ecumenical investigation of this subject from Oscar Cullmann and Otto Karrer down to the Lutheran-Catholic discussions of the present day. They should have shown themselves in touch with the far wider and deeper vision now available of this theme, quite different from the view arising out of the old polemics — which sees the rock-principle as inherent in the entire tissue, flesh and bone, of the Church. It is a principle of

faith before it is a principle of government, and it is only a principle of government because it is a principle of faith. It controls the micro-organism in the Church in the same way as it controls the macro-organism of the Church, and it is precisely for this reason that the Church holds together with such firmness. Certainly, we have abandoned much of former exegesis; but we have done this in favour of much better exegesis, putting the whole thing on a sounder footing, and this the Statement fails to reflect. It speaks at one point (n.12) of explaining the importance of the Bishop of Rome 'by analogy with the position of Peter among the apostles', but this suggests that two distinct realities are involved, comparable with one another, and overlooks the essential continuity of function in the one community.

The second problem arises over the use of the language of 'divine right' of the successors of Peter; here some Anglicans feel that they are being unchurched by the papal claims. This question was so thoroughly gone into at Vatican II and has been so much discussed since,¹ that one is bound to feel that the area of incomprehension is still disappointingly vast. What appears to be lacking here is a sense of the universal Church: catholicity is necessarily expressed by actual communion with the Church throughout the world, including, as the document says, the bishop of Rome with his universal primacy 'as part of God's design for the universal *koinonia*, and cannot be sufficiently expressed by the possession of 'catholic attributes' by a local church that is out of communion.

The third difficulty concerns Papal infallibility (as distinct from the infallibility of the Church, which seems to be acceptable). And this, of course, leads on to the Marian dogmas . . . The fourth difficulty is the Papal claim to universal immediate jurisdiction; the document makes a couple of suggestions that may in due course resolve this one.

In the first two Agreed Statements, one felt that one was reading the work of theologians who, working together, had produced new insights and a fresh synthesis from which all could profit. In this one, the strong impression is given of a Catholic team working hard (too hard?) to answer the questions and meet the objections of an Anglican one. This impression is strengthened by the reference in the Preface to the fact that

1. See, for instance, the Editorial in *The Clergy Review* for August 1976.

'we have not been able to resolve some of the difficulties of Anglicans concerning Roman Catholic belief relating to the office of the bishop of Rome'.

I cannot help thinking that if more attention had been given to the real 'Authority in the Church', that is to say to the Word of God himself and to the manner of his presence with his Church for all time, instead of to the many kinds of subordinate authority, the Commission would have got much further forward. For the Church is not held together by these subordinate authorities, in whom, as in the ordinary members of

the Church, we will never find perfection. The search for a perfect theology, for perfect popes and bishops, for perfect organization, for overwhelmingly visible holiness, keeps many out of the Church, as it has led many out in the past. But the whole point of the Church is that those things are not to be found there; perfection is found in God alone, and to join his Church is to line oneself up with human sin. That is what he did himself; besides being the only motive strong enough to bring us into his Church, it is the only one that keeps us there and makes us live in hope.

THE EDITOR

Give us back our Fifty-two Sundays

By John Allen

IT HAS been suggested that at least on one Sunday in the year we should simply worship God without any special theme — *latría* it used to be called — but this suggestion is now recognized as *proxima haeresi*. The following *Ad Clerum* letter shows why:

Notes for October

There are plenty of exciting events this month — special Sundays, special collections, special days of prayer. (Don't forget by the way that the last Sunday in September, September 26th is special too. It is Home Mission Sunday, when sermon and bidding prayers should be concerned with the Christianizing of our own country, and a retiring collection may be taken up for the Catholic Missionary Society.)

To begin with, and running right through the month, are October Devotions. Only quite recently, in *Marialis cultus*, Pope Paul reminded us to continue to recommend the prayer of the Rosary to the faithful. Arrangements should be made in all churches of the diocese for the public recital of this great prayer.

On the first Sunday in October, October 3rd, is the usual monthly retiring collection for the diocesan Rescue Society.

October 3rd is also World Day of Prayer for Kindness to Animals (August 1976-1977 is Animal Welfare Year), sponsored by the Fellowship of Life, which seeks to unite all Christians and all others concerned with exercising a true dominion over God's animal creation. A Mass in Westminster Cathedral on this Sunday will mark this world day of prayer for animals.

Also on Sunday, October 3rd, the Family Fast collection should be taken up, when our people contribute to the poor of the world through CAFOD. They should be reminded that Friday, 1st October, is Family Fast Day. You have already received literature about this.

Sunday, 10th October, sees the special collection for Bishop's Administration, to pay for all the nice things we post to you about special Sundays.

Then, all through the following week, we keep Brotherhood Week, sponsored by the local