

# Primacy and Conciliarity

*The Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on Authority in the Church*

EDWARD YARNOLD S.J.\*

AS SOON as the Agreed Statement on 'Authority in the Church' came to be published in the January of this year, both the comments and the correspondence in the press considered it almost exclusively from a single viewpoint: Anglican theologians accept papal primacy. Such concentration was perhaps inevitable; had not the Pope himself said, what everyone else felt but some were too polite to put into words, that the greatest obstacle to re-union between the two Churches concerned was the papacy? It is true that the dramatic emphasis given to this point served a useful purpose: at least the commentators had to stop saying that ecumenism had ground to a halt. Nevertheless one unfortunate result has been that the other important conclusions of the statement have received little attention; and — perhaps a more important matter — not much has been said about the nature of the primacy which is recommended, or of the reasons which are set out in its support. The fact that eighteen Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians have agreed that primacy 'needs to be realised at the universal level' and that 'it seems appropriate' that such primacy should be held by the Roman see (23)<sup>1</sup> has little significance in the long run unless they can set out arguments in support of their position.

NATURALLY, some of the affirmations of the Statement are truisms, which needed to be included for the sake of completeness and because their omission would have provoked criticism; for example, that authority in the Church is derived from Christ and is the gift of the Holy Spirit (1). But some of the other preliminary points which the Commission makes are of greater practical importance.

First, it was necessary to say something about the dependence of all Christian authority upon scripture. Those Anglicans who insist upon their Protestant origins cannot accept any theology of the Church which fails to state that all authority is 'under the judgment of scripture'. On the other hand, no Catholic could be content with any suggestion that authority depends upon the private

interpretation which individuals make of the Bible under the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the issue of *scriptura sola* could not be avoided. The nuanced position taken by the Commission is that the Church indeed draws inspiration from scripture and 'refers' to scripture its life and teaching, for it is through scripture that 'the authority of the Word of God is conveyed'. But the criterion to which the Christian faith is to be referred is not said to be the Bible *tout court* but the 'common faith', i.e. the 'common mind in determining how the gospel should be interpreted and obeyed' (2). For not only is it a plain fact that every Christian reads scripture not with the naked eye, so to speak, but through glasses tinted by the interpretations of others, especially those of the particular Christian community of which he feels himself a part; it is also an article of faith shared by both Anglicans and Roman Catholics that it is a function of the ordained ministry, a function which is essential to the Church Christ founded, to 'discern what is of the Spirit in the diversity of the Church's life', that is, to express the genuine mind of the Church concerning the interpretation and application of the gospel (*Canterbury* 7,10). The judgments of the Church's councils, therefore, have to be both 'faithful to scripture' and 'consistent with tradition' (19). The Statement speaks also of the Church's 'living remembrance of Jesus Christ', a remembrance which is preserved and enriched, not only by meditation on scripture, but also by the liturgy and private prayer (15). Thus, while explicitly rejecting *scriptura sola*, the Commission is far from accepting the view that there are truths of faith preserved in tradition which are not contained in scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly it was necessary to say something about charismatic authority. Even within the Roman Catholic Church much has been written recently about the possibility that charisms of founding and guiding a Christian community may arise spontaneously, i.e. without a commission from the Church in the form of ordination.<sup>3</sup> Consequently the document speaks of the authority of those within the Church whom the Spirit has endowed with holiness of life or with special talents, such as those listed in Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12, as well as the authority of those who have been ordained to ministry

\* Fr Yarnold is a member of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission.

in the Church (4,5). Yet although the Statement follows St Paul in regarding ordination as itself a charism or gift of the Spirit, it is only of the ordained bishop that it is said that 'he can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity in (the Church's) daily life' (5).

THE PROCESS of reasoning by which the need for a universal primacy is established has been described as 'inductive' or 'historical', rather than 'deductive' or 'exegetical'. The need for primacy is not deduced from any particular texts in the way that Catholic apologetics has sometimes tried to show that Mt 16.18 is a formula establishing the papacy. The statement makes little direct appeal to Scripture in expounding its conception of episcopal authority; it is content to reaffirm the insights of the earlier statement on Ministry and Ordination. The key to the latter Statement is the axiom that it is the purpose of all ministry in the Church 'to build up the community (*koinonia*)', a principle that is based on Eph 4.11-13 (*Canterbury* 3,5). 'Like any human community the Church requires a focus of leadership and unity, which the Holy Spirit provides in the ordained ministry' (*Canterbury* 7). This office of promoting the unity of the *koinonia* is pastoral (helping the people to live Christian lives), prophetic (involving the responsibility to teach, i.e. to be the authentic interpreter of the Church's faith) and sacramental (including above all the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of the Church's unity) (*Canterbury* 9-13).

The Venice Statement advances beyond these premises. Since the Church's *koinonia* is realised not only within local communities but also in their fellowship with one another, it is part of the bishop's duty to express and promote the unity of his local church with all the other churches (8). This responsibility bishops fulfil partly 'by coming together to discuss matters of mutual concern' in councils, whether regional or general, in which binding decrees are sometimes enacted. Such decrees, however, are not impositions on the local churches but are 'designed to strengthen' their 'life and mission' (9). This regional *koinonia* of Churches came in the course of history to be expressed in another way: bishops of certain prominent sees were accorded the status of regional primates in order to assist the other bishops 'to promote in their churches right teaching, holiness in life, brotherly unity and the Church's mission to the world' (11).

The need for regional primates is in this way traced to its historical origins, but is also shown to be the logical consequence of the responsibilities of the ordained ministry, which have in turn been linked with Ephesians 4. The argument is therefore a complex intertwining of historical, deductive and exegetical reasoning. The same

lines are then produced until they converge on the need of a primacy for the universal Church. The historical development of the universal primacy is considered (though not established in detail) in para 12;<sup>4</sup> the deductive argument is stated in para. 23: 'If God's will for the unity in love and truth of the whole Christian community is to be fulfilled, this general pattern of the complementary primatial and conciliar aspects of *episcopate* serving the *koinonia* of the churches needs to be realised at the universal level'. The right of Rome to exercise that primacy is historical and prescriptive: no other see has exercised such a primacy, and there is no other claimant.

This argument will come under minute scrutiny from both Churches. Some Anglicans will wish to ask why the task of serving universal unity needs to belong to any individual: could it not be performed by a synod? The Roman Catholic on the other hand may ask whether the Statement has allowed the Roman primacy a solid enough foundation: is it good enough simply to appeal to history and to convention? Both questions, each from its particular standpoint, concern the type of necessity that is claimed for the existence of a universal primate.

There are certain passages in the document which point to a solution. It is 'intrinsic' to the Church's structure that there should be ordained ministers, chief among whom are bishops, 'for preserving and promoting the integrity of the *koinonia*' (5). Although both Anglicans and Roman Catholics agree that church government is not dictatorial but conciliar or collegial, with parish priest presiding over his parish council, bishop presiding over his brother priests, and primate (or, in the Roman Catholic Church, pope) presiding over his brother bishops, both Churches regard it as essential to their systems of government that there should be a single ordained individual at each level who is the focus of unity. Both Churches, in other words, regard a presbyterian or oligarchic structure as deficient. The Agreed Statement takes this belief that God's will for his Church requires that *episcopate* at each level should be held by one man, and projects it on to the universal level. Although it is not said explicitly, the logic of the document implies that universal primacy, like local ministry, is intrinsic to the Church.

Does this justification of universal primacy do justice to the Catholic dogma that it is 'by the institution of Christ our Lord himself, i.e. by divine right, that St Peter should have perpetual successors in primacy over the whole Church' (Vatican I, DS 3058)? The Venice Statement is correct in pointing out that 'the language of "divine right" ... has no clear interpretation in modern Roman Catholic theology' (24). Many Catholic theologians would feel unable to affirm with certainty that Jesus spoke the Petrine text of Matthew 16 in the form

in which it has come down to us, or that, even if he did, he intended at the time to imply that St Peter would have successors. For such theologians divine right, or institution by Christ, when applied to detailed arrangement of church practice, implies that the institution in question is not an arbitrary human invention, but is the concrete embodiment of a general intention expressed by Jesus in his lifetime, adopted by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus the Council of Trent affirmed that sacramental confession was instituted 'by divine right' (DS 1706), though few theologians would hold that Jesus instructed his apostles to hear confessions; the point is that sacramental confession is the Church's practical embodiment of Jesus' expressed will for the salvation of sinners and for the performance of rites as a means of grace, which the Church has come to express in this particular form under the guidance of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> The Statement suggests that the Commission is prepared to say that the papacy is of divine right in this sense: 'If it [the term "divine right"] is understood as affirming that the universal primacy of the bishop of Rome is part of God's design for the universal *koinonia* then it need not be a matter of disagreement' (24).<sup>6</sup> This affirmation seems to do justice to Catholic teaching.

IT WILL BE EVIDENT that the argument for papal primacy, while not without considerable force, is not so compelling as to set every Anglican running to the nearest Catholic priest in order to make an immediate individual submission to Rome. By most Anglicans acceptance of Roman primacy will be seen as a desirable prospect which must be weighed against the sacrifice that must be made of existing assets in order to obtain it. If the price to be paid includes the fragmentation of the Anglican Communion, many will feel it would be wrong to pay it.

Many Anglicans also would feel it an unjustifiable risk to put themselves at the mercy of Roman government. The objection will perhaps be to curial more than to papal government. The Anglican mind is accustomed to a period of open discussion before decisions are taken; many Vatican decisions are promulgated without much evidence of a search to discover the mind of the faithful, often with apparent disregard of expert opinion, often too with a very unconvincing statement of the reasons which prompted the decision. The recent rejection of the ordination of women by the Holy Office is a case in point.

The onus is on Rome to make Roman primacy practically as well as theologically credible to Anglicans. It will help if the revised code of canon law can distinguish clearly between the different levels of papal authority. For the pope is not only bishop of Rome and universal primate. Between these two levels, he has authority on

one, or even two, intermediate planes, namely as metropolitan of the Roman province and as patriarch of the western Latin Church.<sup>7</sup> If the Anglican Communion became a uniate Church, like the Maronite Church, it would be largely self-governing, under its own primate or patriarch, linked with the universal Church by the need to preserve a common mind in matters of faith, by communion with the Roman see, and by being subject to the immediate jurisdiction of the pope, to which Vatican I set two general, but very important limits: Roman primacy exists for the sake of the unity of the Church, and may not be used to undermine the divinely-instituted power of each bishop in his own diocese (DS 3051, 3060, 3061).

Yet, when all is said and done, it is the spirit in which papal authority is exercised rather than the precision of canon law which will determine whether Anglicans decide to embrace Roman primacy or not. Roman authority must be seen to be a service, not an imposition. That this is not always so, Pope Paul himself is aware, as the words he addressed in 1967 to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity show: 'We are well aware that the Pope is undubitably the greatest obstacle on the road of ecumenism. What are we to say? Must we appeal once more to the titles which justify our mission? Must we once more attempt to present in exact terms what it really wishes to be: the indispensable principle of truth, charity and unity? A pastoral mission of direction, service and brotherhood, which does not challenge the liberty and the honour of anyone who has a legitimate position in God's Church, but on the contrary protects the rights of all and claims no other obedience save that which is required of children belonging to the same family' (AAS, 59 (1967), p.498).

To this spirit of respect and service which the Pope regards as the proper characteristic of the primacy the Venice Statement applies the terms 'conciliarity' and 'co-responsibility'. This spirit should be present in the way in which a regional primate fulfils his duty to 'assist the bishops to promote in their churches right teaching, holiness in life, brotherly unity and the Church's mission to the world' (11). Similarly, the primatial authority of the pope 'was explicitly intended to support' the local bishop's in their ministry of oversight, and to 'guard and promote the faithfulness of all the churches to Christ and one another' (12). Some Catholic theologians have applied to the papacy the principle of subsidiarity,<sup>8</sup> that is to say, the pope's primacy is intended to safeguard and promote the life of the local churches under their own bishops and their unity with one another, and he should not take upon himself responsibilities which can properly be exercised at the local level. Even at the universal level, the pope should not take upon himself

alone what can be accomplished satisfactorily by the college of bishops under his presidency.

It is a pity, though thoroughly understandable, that the comments in the press, and especially the headlines, tended to concentrate on the primatial authority of the pope, and said little about conciliarity, which receives equal emphasis in the Statement. 'Primacy and conciliarity are complementary elements of *episcopate* ... The *koinonia* of the churches requires that a proper balance be preserved between the two with the responsible participation of the whole people of God' (22). It would have been good if a Roman Catholic paper had carried as its headline not 'Anglicans accept primacy of Rome', but 'Catholics affirm conciliarity', for the second is just as important, and carries at least as many practical consequences, as the first. If the principle of subsidiarity were put into practice at every level in the Catholic Church, the revolution in day-to-day Church life would be greater than if the Anglican Communion accepted the pope. Yet the theological leap required is much greater on the side of the Anglicans, as are the fears to be overcome. Every immoderate exercise of authority on the Catholic side adds to the difficulty for Anglicans of taking the leap and overcoming the fears. The Lord had hard words to speak to those who add to other people's burdens.

**L**ITTLE SPACE REMAINS to speak of the other main concern of the Venice Statement, the exercise of teaching authority in the Church. I have chosen to concentrate here on primacy, because readers can find elsewhere my understanding of the Commission's mind concerning the authority to proclaim the church's faith.<sup>9</sup>

The movement of the argument concerning teaching authority can be summarised as follows. *Episcopate* implies authority to teach (5): this is true also of regional primates (11). It therefore follows that the universal primate, who realises at the universal level the 'general pattern of the complementary primatial and conciliar aspects of *episcopate* serving the *koinonia* of the churches' (23), will also need to exercise teaching authority for the preservation of the whole Church in the essentials of the one faith; but the Statement does not draw this inference explicitly, though it was made explicitly without contradiction in the Commission's discussions. Moreover, not only are Christians 'confident that ... failures cannot destroy the Church's ability to proclaim the gospel', in other words, that the Church is indefectible (18); the document also states that 'when the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous' and are 'protected from error' by the Holy Spirit' (19), in other words that the Church on such occasions can be called infallible (24 note). The Commission was not, however, able to agree to taking the final step and stating that there are occa-

sions when the universal primate in proclaiming the faith of the Church can be the organ of the Church's infallibility; Anglican difficulties on this are stated in para. 24.

Unlike the statements on the Eucharist and on Ministry, this document lists several problems that remain despite the agreed conclusions that have been reached (24).<sup>10</sup> Consequently the Commission on this occasion does not claim 'substantial agreement'. It does, however, profess to have reached a 'consensus ... of fundamental importance ... on authority in the Church and, in particular, on the basic principles of primacy' (24). Some commentators have judged that the Commission's agreement is trifling, and stops short precisely at the point where difficulties begin. This is not the Commission's own view, for it believes that the consensus 'provides a solid basis for confronting' the remaining difficulties (24). Indeed the Commission ends by suggesting that the three Agreed Statements, if accepted by the two Churches, represent 'a unity at the level of faith which not only justifies but requires action to bring about a closer sharing between our two Communion in life, worship and mission' (26). The Commission does not recommend any particular action; but we are surely near the point, if we have not already reached it, at which Rome must find some mutually acceptable way of recognising the validity of Anglican orders, or of conferring validity on them.

#### NOTES

1. Numbers in brackets refer to the paragraph numbers of the Statement on Authority in the Church. Numbers preceded by *Canterbury* refer to the paragraph numbers of the 1973 Agreed Statement on Ministry and Ordination.
2. Some may feel that the Statement is not explicit enough in rejecting the theory that some truths of revelation are to be found only in tradition and not in scripture; but even the Decree on Revelation of Vatican II stops short of such an explicit rejection.
3. See for example H. Küng, *Structures of the Church* (London 1965), pp. 154-190.
4. It should be noted that the Statement does not say that the universal primacy developed later than the regional, but only that the development of regional primacy is 'the context' within which the Roman see acquired its universal primacy (12).
5. Cf. A. Amato, *I Pronunciamenti Tridentini sulla Necessità della Confessione Sacramentale nei Canonici 6-9 della Sessione XIV* (Rome 1974).
6. Although the doctrinal preamble goes further, the formal definition of Vatican I explicitly attributes divine right only to the doctrine that St Peter should have perpetual successors in the primacy, not to the doctrine that the bishop of Rome is that successor.
7. Cf. H. Küng, *op.cit.*, pp. 216-7, esp. n.45.
8. Cf. H. Küng, *ibid.*
9. E.J. Yarnold S.J. and Henry Chadwick, *Truth and Authority* (London, CTS and SPCK, 1977).
10. Some of the difficulties have been discussed by the way in the course of this article. They are discussed at greater length in *Truth and Authority*.