

1870: in search of a definition of the problem

Christians agree that the "deposit" of faith needs to be protected as it is also to be reinterpreted and reapplied in each age. This process of reinterpretation, balanced by protection, we call 'development', a term which allows for changes but at the same time insists on continuity in identity. Accordingly, although the Church has authority in controversies of faith, its decisions are not to be extrinsic to the faith of the community, first enshrined in holy scripture and then interpreted in the mind of the Church in its transmission of the truth of the Gospel. In short, no teaching authority in the Church can add new revelation to the original deposit.

The Gospel is commended to us by the authority of Christ through his Church. To believe is to be associated with all the people of God, who by faith are one with the Lord and look to the testimony of the prophets, saints and martyrs in every generation. The whole Church as a living organism is therefore a norm and test of authenticity in the widest sense and scope. Local congregations in eucharistic communion, led by their bishops, express their faith through synodical decisions, and through assemblies of bishops decisions are taken for the guidance of the faithful in matters of faith and of conduct. In exceptional circumstances a primate has to act on his own (sometimes in face of some reluctance for a time to follow his lead). As universal primates bishops of Rome, in the history of the Church, have taken initiatives to protect and even to enforce the Church's maintenance in the truth. The institution of the papacy has had a long history with some dark chapters; but for the most part the popes have done much to steer the Church out of grave dangers.

The question at issue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics is not whether this gift, associated with the role of primatial authority in teaching and in jurisdiction, can ever fail, but whether, in certain circumstances and subject to careful conditions, the universal primate's judgements can share in that certainty of authority that Christians attach to the faith of the universal Church. That the universal primate

should take a lead in the protection and clarification of the faith is non-controversial. But Anglicans, who have been out of communion with the Roman see (since the papal excommunication of Queen Elizabeth I?), do not now instinctively look to the see of St. Peter to find the ordinary teacher of the Church with the right to pronounce without his pronouncement being subject to a higher instance and with a spiritual gift inherent in his office and role enabling him to guide the Church. This gap is more psychological than theological, and could be bridged if the road to communion were otherwise open. In effect the difference between those 'who <sup>ask</sup> assume to papal infallibility' (in the rigorous terms of the 1870 definition) and those who do not, can be so small as to be reducible to the acknowledgement (or not) of this locus of authority: In other words the definition of 1870 is not the addition of an instrument or organ of authority that is taken to underpin other dogmas appended to the deposit of faith. To Anglicans, for whom the Church's need for a universal primate to bind together all the local churches in eucharistic communion is a non-controversial affirmation, the 1870 definition raises the question whether it is correct to ascribe 'infallibility' to certain, restricted utterances of the universal primate. This problem is especially felt if, a) this has the consequence of devaluing authoritative pronouncements by the Pope which do not fulfil the rarified conditions laid down in 1870 for infallibility; b) the only generally agreed instances of infallible papal decisions are the two Marian definitions whose significance is essentially devotional since in dogmatic terms they do not do more than illustrate or underline truths that already form parts of the agreed tradition of faith.