

ARC 183

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"AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH"-

RC THEOLOGY COMMISSION RESPONSE

The Theology Commission of the RC Bishops' Conference publishes today (Thursday, December 15) its response to the 1977 International Anglican/Roman Catholic Agreed Statement, "Authority in the Church". The response welcomes and endorses the approach and analysis set out by the Agreed Statement. The method of the Statement "to read history in the light of our primary confession of faith that there is one authority in the Church" will lead to "that visible unity, which is the whole aim of the ecumenical movement."

The response looks at the areas of episcopacy, primacy, human weakness, authority in matters of faith and conciliar and primatial authority and finds much to agree with in the Agreed Statement's conclusions. But problems are recognised as remaining:- the treatment of the Petrine texts, - "The Commission thinks that these texts may bear more weight than the statement seems to suggest. Nevertheless, Roman Catholic convictions about the Roman See do not rest on any particular text, but rather on a converging of the Scriptures and practice." Problems too concerning - divine right - infallibility - universal jurisdiction are acknowledged.

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The theologians conclude "now that we have before us all the agreed statements.... we must ensure that the new approach, reflected in these statements, secures what is indeed central and does not avoid other issues which must be faced.

TEXT

HIERARCHY THEOLOGY COMMISSION

A response to the Venice Statement: Authority in the Church

1. We read this document not as a statement of agreement but as an agreed statement; it includes an agreement to differ on certain points. All the signatories acknowledge, for example, the problems and prospects precisely as described in §24; but we take it as their agreed intention to give far greater weight to the shared convictions set out in the main body of the document. We also read it as a document addressed to the world wide Anglican Communion and the whole Roman Catholic Church.
2. The statement considers the authority that belongs to the ministries of episcopate and primacy in the context of the wider issue of Christian authority and its various manifestations in the Church. We endorse both this approach and the analysis set out of Christian Authority and Authority in the Church.
3. The method in the statement is to read history in the light of our primary confession of faith that there is one authority in the Church, namely that of Christ, and so discern God's will for his Church today. This method is fully appropriate for the matter under examination; it leads inevitably to definite conclusions; if it is followed through, it will lead to that visibly Christian unity, which is the whole aim of the ecumenical movement.
4. Episcopacy
By the method chosen the statement legitimately comes to the following conclusion about the ministry of episcopate:
"This service of the Church, officially entrusted only to ordained ministers

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is intrinsic to the Church's structure according to the mandate given by Christ and recognised by the community." §5.

The ministry of episcopate was considered at length in the agreed statement: Ministry and Ordination.

5. Primacy

As regards the ministry of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome the statement concludes:

"Communion with him is intended as a safeguard of the catholicity of each local church, and as a sign of the communion of all the churches". §12.

As Catholics we see this intention to be divine, not merely human.

It is obvious that the statement does not present a fully worked out understanding of primacy at its various levels; but the argumentation provides a basis for discerning when the exercise of primacy falls short of the ideal and in what sense communion with the universal primate is needed for a church to have the wholeness and catholicity intended by Christ.

6. Human Weakness

The statement refers in §7 to 'Human weakness' and in §12 observes that 'neither theory nor practice has ever fully reflected these ideals'. If we understand rightly the action of God in Christ healing human weakness and never overcome by sin and failure, we cannot require perfection in the ministers before responding in faith to the ministries of episcopate and primacy which God wills for his Church.

7. Authority in matters of faith

Since episcopate and primacy are not only concerned with matters of doctrine, it is appropriate that the statement considers the particular question of authority in matters of faith as part of the full service exercised in these ministries.

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The statement recognises the Church's need for authority in matters of faith:
"When decisions (as in Nicaea in 325) affect the entire Church and deal with controverted matters which have been widely and seriously debated, it is important to establish criteria for the recognition and reception of conciliar definitions and disciplinary decisions." § 16

This authority has been exercised and the statement accurately sets out the balance between what is of lasting value and the need for subsequent restatement. § 15

8. Conciliar and Primatial Authority

In both our churches the debate on authority in doctrinal matters continues. The statement, particularly in §9, both secures what is required by faith and leaves open the areas still under discussion.

The authority of an ecumenical council is clearly stated:

"When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous". §19

With the statement we follow the argument to its conclusion:

"It seems appropriate that in any future union a universal primacy such as has been described should be held by that see (viz. Rome)." §23

9. Problems and Prospects

It is clear that problems remain. The statement itself acknowledges some of them:

(a) Petrine texts. This Commission thinks that these texts may bear more weight than the statement seems to suggest. Nevertheless, Roman Catholic convictions about the Roman See do not rest on any particular text, but rather on a converging of the Scriptures and practice.

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(b) Divine right. The statement itself speaks of what God intends. It provides the basis for assessing the importance in God's plan for a church to be in communion with the Roman See if it is to achieve that fulness intended by Christ.

(c) Infallibility. This difficulty is mentioned. The explanation given in the Venice Statement reflects classical Roman Catholic theology.

The Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary are part of Roman Catholic faith. We do not understand them without reference to the great convictions of the Christian faith.

(d) Universal jurisdiction. Although ultimate responsibility and therefore appropriate authority rest in the one who exercises universal primacy, nevertheless the manner of its exercise will vary. For example, as understanding develops of the church as koinonia and the primacy as a ministry of episcopate for the whole church, universal jurisdiction undergoes re-examination.

10. Now that we have before us all the agreed statements we will need to consider the terms and concepts which have arisen from and formed our thinking in the past; they are not easily separated from convictions we hold as central. Now we must ensure that the new approach, reflected in these statements, secures what is indeed central and does not avoid other issues which must be faced.

The Theology Commission. October 1977.

ENDS...