

THE ARCIC AGREED STATEMENT ON AUTHORITY:
AN ORTHODOX COMMENT

In the immediate future, so it is expected, there will begin an official 'theological dialogue' between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. The international commissions on either side have already been appointed, and are now preparing for their task in separate preliminary meetings. No date has yet been announced for the first joint conference, but it must surely happen very soon. The crucial question at these forthcoming joint discussions, although not necessarily the first to be considered, will undoubtedly be the ministry of the Papacy within the Church.¹ This, rather than the Filioque, seems now to be the most difficult issue, although the two are perhaps connected. So it is with the keenest interest that we Orthodox should look at the recent statement on 'Authority in the Church', prepared by the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission. What the Catholics agreed to affirm with the Anglicans in 1976 constitutes an important precedent for what they will say to us Orthodox at our long-awaited dialogue.

On the whole Orthodox have reason to be much encouraged by the Venice agreed statement, although not surprisingly - for it is no more than an initial stage in a lengthy process - the document seems to us incomplete or ambiguous in regard to certain fundamental points. This incompleteness is of course acknowledged at the end of the statement itself (para. 24). Let me as an Orthodox first mention three points which I find reassuring, and then refer to three themes requiring further clarification.

(1) I am encouraged first to find that, throughout the statement, authority is envisaged as something exercised within and not over the Church. Faithful to Christ's admonition, 'It shall not be so

among you...' (Matt. 20:26), the statement understands church authority, not in terms of exousia or domination, but in terms of diakonia or ministry. As Dr Yarnold and Dr Chadwick observe in their valuable commentary on the ARCIC statement, 'Christian authority ... is not so much a power or a privilege as a capability of service.'² The phrase 'primacy of jurisdiction' is avoided in the main body of the statement; pastoral rather than juridical categories are employed throughout. All this is genuinely helpful from an Orthodox viewpoint; for in the past one of our chief reproaches against Rome has been the undue legalism of Latin theology.³ But pastoral language must not be allowed to degenerate into woolly expressions of good will. To prevent this, church authority needs to be set in a specifically eucharistic context - which, unfortunately, the ARCIC statement fails to do. To this point we shall return shortly.

(2) As an Orthodox I am also encouraged to note a brief section on the authority of holiness (para. 4). Here I agree with what is said by Dr Geoffrey Wainwright, in his recent comment as a Methodist on the ARCIC statement.⁴ In the Eastern Christian tradition, the utmost importance is attached to the prophetic witness of the geron or starets, the Spirit-filled holy man or 'elder', who is often a priest-monk but equally may be a lay person, not holding any office in the institutional structure of the Church. On occasion these startsi, men such as St Seraphim of Sarov or St John of Kronstadt in 19th-century Russia, have exercised an influence far more profound than any contemporary bishop or patriarch.

(3) Most encouraging of all is the way in which the ARCIC statement bases its doctrine of primacy upon the collegiality of the Church. The document speaks first about the local bishop,

then about councils, then about regional primacy, and finally about universal primacy. This is exactly the perspective of Orthodoxy. The notion of universal primacy becomes distorted, and even heretical, if it is taken in isolation.. To be correctly interpreted, the universal primacy of Rome needs to be seen as the top of a ladder, as the coping-stone in a graded hierarchy of authorities. The Roman primacy exists alongside many lesser forms of primacy, and functions within a collegial or conciliar context.

For Orthodoxy, the basic text on primacy remains always the 34th Apostolic Canon. This refers to regional primacy, but the underlying principle of mutual consultation applies equally to universal primacy: 'The bishops of every nation are to acknowledge him who is the first among them and to regard him as their head, and they should do nothing of consequence without his consent.... But neither let him who is the first do anything without the consent of all. In this way there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' Here the Church is viewed as an icon of the Trinity, with the relation of the primate to his colleagues reproducing that of God the Father to the other two divine persons. It is in this Trinitarian perspective that Orthodoxy looks at papal primacy.. Although the ARCIC statement does not refer explicitly to Trinitarian theology, the same approach to church authority is implicit in many of its affirmations, as when it says: 'A primate exercises his ministry not in isolation but in collegial association with his brother bishops' (para.. 21).

Some years ago,⁵ when attempting to develop in positive terms an Orthodox interpretation of Rome's diakonia, I used two phrases in particular: 'The pope is the mouth of the Church and the

episcopate' (infallibility); 'Among the bishops the pope is the elder brother, in the absence of the father' (primacy). The pope is the 'mouth': at certain decisive moments in the Church's life he is called to bear witness and give voice to the faith that all alike hold, as St Peter did on the road to Caesarea Philippi and on the day of Pentecost. The pope is the 'elder brother': he is not a ruler endowed with absolute power over the ecclesial family, but the first among equals, called to 'strengthen' his brethren and to 'feed' Christ's flock (Luke 22:32; John 21:15-17 - not juridical phrases!) by exercising a universal sollicitudo, an all-embracing pastoral care for the whole Church.

So I wrote eight years ago. Though the language of the ARCIC statement is somewhat different, it describes the papal diakonia in very much the same way. First, the primate is regarded by the Venice commission as a 'mouth': '... after consulting his fellow bishops, he may speak in their name and express their mind on occasion he will take an initiative in speaking for the Church' (para. 20). The statement rightly qualifies this by adding at once that this is only one of the ways in which the Holy Spirit keeps the people of God faithful to the Gospel. Secondly, the primate is seen as 'elder brother', not as absolute monarch: 'Far from overriding the authority of the bishops in their own dioceses, this service [of the see of Rome] was explicitly intended to support them in their ministry of oversight. The Second Vatican Council placed this service in the wider context of the shared responsibility of all the bishops Communion with the bishop of Rome does not imply submission to an authority which would stifle the distinctive features of the local churches' (para. 12). These words are music to an Orthodox ear. In the centuries of estrangement between Rome and the East, the Orthodox

saw themselves as defending precisely the rights of the local Church against an excessive centralization.

Now I turn to the three themes which, so it seems to me, need to be more fully developed on future occasions, in either the Anglican/Roman Catholic or the Orthodox/Roman Catholic dialogue. Possibly the ARCIC commission already has these points in mind. My comments are in any case intended, not as a criticism, but as suggestions for the future. In addition to these three themes, I would also as an Orthodox wish to pursue much further the points raised in para. 24, especially the last two, concerning the papal claims to infallibility and to supreme 'ordinary' jurisdiction. It is the second of these that causes the greatest difficulty to the Orthodox Church. So far as the term 'infallible' is concerned, this is a word sometimes employed by Orthodox writers today, but most of them do not feel very happy about it. It is not enough to say that Orthodoxy ascribes to an ecumenical council the infallibility that Rome ascribes to the pope; more than this, Orthodoxy has doubts about the concept of 'infallibility' as such, and feels that it does not adequately describe the way in which the Spirit speaks to the Church. All Orthodox theology is essentially theology according to the 'mind' of the Fathers, whereas the term 'infallible' is not Patristic but is of medieval Latin coinage, dating only from the 12th century.⁶ I am inclined to agree with Professor Anthony Hanson that 'the whole concept has too much inherent ambiguity to be capable of being satisfactorily defined'.⁷ As to supreme 'ordinary' jurisdiction, the trouble here is not that the term is too vague but that it is much too precise; and to an Orthodox it seemingly implies an understanding of universal primacy that overthrows the proper independence of the local Church.

The ARCIC statement denies that this was the intention of the First Vatican Council. Clearly much more needs to be said so as to meet Orthodox and Anglican difficulties.

The three additional points, to which I would like to draw attention here, are these:

(1) More needs to be said about the manner in which a council is 'received' as 'ecumenical'. Since this is a subject on which we Orthodox often disagree among ourselves,⁸ we may hope that discussion with Catholics and with Anglicans will help us to clarify our own ideas. The ARCIC statement remarks, 'It is important to establish criteria for the recognition and reception of conciliar definitions'; it adds, 'This process [of reception] is often gradual', an important part being played by the 'response of the faithful' (para.16). I agree over the gradualness and the significance of the sensus fidelium; but I doubt whether any exterior or formal criteria can be established to test or predetermine the process of reception. Professor Hanson is surely correct when he says that, in the last resort, the Church can only know ex post facto whether a conciliar definition is ecumenical and binding.⁹ In the continuing history and the living experience of the Church it becomes manifest that God has in fact spoken through certain councils, and not through others; but how this will become manifest, we cannot predict in advance. And what are we to do when, as with Chalcedon, ~~part~~ part of the sensus fidelium is divided, and part of the faithful accepts the council as ecumenical while part does not? Here precisely we confront the basic problem of Christian division; but I do not think that the difficulty can be solved by seeking formal criteria.

The contention in para. 19 is acceptable - 'When the

Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous' - but only with the proviso that we do not and cannot know in advance whether a particular assembly of bishops will prove to be an ecumenical council or not. As the facts of church history make abundantly plain, 'ecumenicity' (understood in a theological sense) does not depend solely upon the number of the assembled bishops, or upon their geographical distribution, or upon the attitude of pope or emperor towards the gathering in question.

It is certainly true that, in the process of the reception of conciliar decisions, 'considerable weight attached to their confirmation by the principal sees, and in particular by the see of Rome' (para. 17). But Orthodox do not regard confirmation on Rome's part as forming by itself the normative or final criterion. When Drs Yarnold and Chadwick claim in their commentary on the ARCIC statement, 'Subsequent recognition by the Roman see came to be seen as the decisive stage in this process of recognition of a council',¹⁰ they go far beyond what most Eastern Christians would be happy to affirm - and also beyond what is actually said in the ARCIC statement. Roman recognition has usually been decisive in the West, but the Christian East sees it as only one among ~~a~~ several ~~of~~ significant factors.

The ARCIC statement does not commit itself over the exact number of ecumenical councils. It speaks in deliberately vague terms about 'the ecumenical councils of the first centuries' (para. 19), without saying what centuries. The commentary by Drs Yarnold and Chadwick observes, 'Among the first seven ecumenical councils the first four have retained a special place because of the gravity of their subject matter.'¹¹ This distinction

does not seem to me at all satisfactory. The fifth, sixth and seventh councils were all concerned, in various ways, with basic aspects of Christology, and their subject matter in no way lacks 'gravity'. If a distinction is to be made, it is more reasonable to draw ^{the line} ~~the line~~ between the first three and those that follow; this is a ^{question} ~~line~~ that is being explored in the current dialogue between the Orthodox and the 'Oriental' Christians (the Copts, Ethiopians, Syrians, Armenians, etc.). But Orthodox would wish to insist also upon the fundamental unity of all seven councils, as complementing one another and comprising a single whole.

(2) It is at first sight surprising that, in discussing authority, the Venica statement has virtually nothing to say about the apostolic succession or about the Eucharist. The only allusion that I can find to either is in para. 5 (a quotation from Acts 2:42). To this it may be answered that these topics have already been covered in the two earlier reports of the International Commission: the apostolic succession in that of Canterbury 1973, and the Eucharist in that of Windsor 1971. So far as the apostolic succession is concerned, such a reply is fairly convincing; but I am less happy as regards the Eucharist. It is true that the Windsor statement contains a valuable, although brief, section on the Eucharist and the Church: 'Christ through the Holy Spirit in the eucharist builds up the life of the Church, strengthens its fellowship and furthers its mission. The identity of the Church as the body of Christ is both expressed and effectively proclaimed by its being centred in, and partaking of, his body and blood' (para. 3). But the point is not further developed in the Windsor statement, the later paragraphs being concerned

exclusively with the eucharistic sacrifice and the presence of Christ in the sacrament. I had therefore expected the Venice statement to emphasize the vital connection subsisting between all authority in the Church and the eucharistic offering. It is the Eucharist that holds the Church together; the Church is fundamentally a eucharistic organism, and only becomes truly what it is when offering and receiving the Holy Mysteries. The authority of the bishop in the local Church, the relationship of the local Churches to each other, the charismatic character of a church council, the diakonia of each primate - ⁿoe of these things can be properly understood except when seen in terms of the eucharistic celebration. The total absence of this dimension of 'eucharistic ecclesiology' surely constitutes the most serious omission in the ARCIC statement on authority.

(3) An Orthodox reader would also welcome a more explicit discussion of the different levels of primacy and collegiality in the Church. The statement affirms the existence - and this is an all-important point for Orthodox as well as Anglicans - not only of universal primacy but of regional primacy as well. Its comments, however, on this regional primacy are very vague (para. 10-11, 20-21). Perhaps at some future meeting, including Orthodox alongside Catholics and Anglicans - for could not our dialogue soon become tri-partite? - the varying levels could be more specifically indicated. I can think at once of five levels, in ascending order:¹²

(i) Regional primacy within a metropolitan district or ecclesiastical province (as, for example, in the Orthodox Archdioceses of Crete or Finland).

(ii) The regional primacy of a metropolitan or archbishop within the so-called 'autocephalous Churches' of the contemporary

Orthodox Church (as in the Orthodox Churches of Greece or Cyprus).

(iii) The regional primacy of the ancient Eastern Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem (in the Byzantine theory of the 'Pentarchy').

(iv) The universal primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (see in particular Canon 28 of Chalcedon).

(v) The universal primacy of the pope of Rome..

It should be noted at once that the Orthodox frequently differ among themselves about the respective value to be assigned to these five levels; indeed, this uncertainty about levels of primacy is the main cause for the present jurisdictional confusion among the Orthodox in the west. Many Orthodox deny a distinction between levels ii and iii. The ancient canons referring to Constantinople are variously interpreted; nor is there a generally accepted view as to how the primacy of the Ecumenical Throne (level iv) ^{on the one side,} differs from the primacy possessed by an autocephalous Church or a Patriarchate (levels ii and iii) and, on the other side, from that which would be assigned to an Orthodox Pope of Rome (level v).. These questions have been put down on the agenda for the 'Great and Holy Council' of the Orthodox Church, now in preparation. But dialogue with Catholics could serve here as a potent catalyst, enabling the Orthodox to achieve some basic 'retraditioning'..

It may surprise Western Christians, Anglican as well as Catholic, that Orthodoxy should assign a universal primacy not only to Old Rome but also to Constantinople the New Rome: yet in fact the very title 'ecumenical' bears precisely the sense of 'universal'. Most Orthodox consider that there is certainly a difference between levels iv and v. But, in view of the prerogative ascribed to Constantinople both by the ecumenical

canons and in the practice of the Church, they would wish to expand and qualify what is said in para. 23 of the ARCIC statement: 'The only see which makes any claim to universal primacy and which has exercised and still exercises such episcopate is the see of Rome.' Likewise, when it is stated in para. 12 that 'the see of Rome ... eventually became the principal centre in matters concerning the Church universal', Orthodox would wish to add a reference here to Constantinople. Not only since the schism between East and West but even before it, the Ecumenical Patriarchate acted as 'the principal centre' so far as Eastern Christianity was concerned; and in a reintegrated Christendom we Orthodox would expect that Constantinople the New Rome will continue to act as a 'principal centre' - co-responsible with the First Rome, while coming in the second place immediately after it.

As a matter of fact the ARCIC statement nowhere mentions Constantinople, just as it nowhere employs the terms 'metropolitan', 'autocephalous Church', or 'patriarch'. Such reticence is bound to astonish Orthodox readers. But they should bear in mind that the document makes no claim to be exhaustive, and was in any case drafted at a dialogue between the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans, not the Orthodox.

What seems to me vitally significant is that the ARCIC statement stresses the existence of regional as well as universal primacy. Here it provides a hopeful basis for future discussions. The fundamental principles have been affirmed, thus opening the way to further elaboration. If the participants at Venice refrained in 1976 from saying more about the varying levels of primacy, no doubt this was partly because they are waiting for the time when the Orthodox can also be directly involved in the negotiations.

The ARCIC statement on 'Authority in the Church' has convinced

me firmly of one thing. The Catholic/Orthodox theological dialogue ought to begin at once. Taking this document as their basis, the two sides can hope to embark on a constructive exchange of views concerning the Roman primacy, with terms of reference altogether different from those prevailing at Lyons in 1274 or at Ferrara and Florence in 1438-9. We Orthodox have already held back too long; let us not lose the moment of opportunity. It is true that on the Orthodox side we are sadly ill-prepared for joint doctrinal discussions. But further postponement will not really help. Shall we ever prepare ourselves effectively, unless we actually sit down at the same table and begin to talk with our Western brethren?

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Notes

¹Compare, from the Catholic side, the view of the late Professor Francis Dvornik (1893-1975): 'One may justly say that today the only serious obstacle to the rapprochement between the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church is the question of the Roman primacy' (Byzance et la primauté romaine [Unam Sanctam 49: Paris 1964], p. 9).

²E.J. Yarnold, SJ, and Henry Chadwick, Truth and Authority. A commentary on the Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission 'Authority in the Church' Venice 1976 (London 1977), p. 9.

³For a typical Orthodox statement, see Fr Alexander Elchaninov (1881-1934), The Diary of a Russian Priest (London 1967), p. 54: 'One of the features which distinguishes our theology from that of the Catholics: it does not look at things legalistically, but in terms of God's grace.'

⁴One in Christ xiii, 3 (1977), p. 199.

⁵See 'Primacy, Collegiality, and the People of God', in Eastern Churches Review iii, 1 (1970), pp. 18-29..

⁶Compare Yarnold and Chadwick, Truth and Authority, p. 19. The only senses given for alathetos in Lampe, A Greek Patristic Lexicon, are (i) 'whose notice nothing escapes', 'all-seeing' (applied to God); (ii) 'not escaping notice', 'unforgotten' - this latter being a rare usage (p. 69).. The word does not appear to be used of ^{councils, bishops or} doctrinal formulations.

⁷One in Christ xiii, 3 (1977), p. 185.

⁸See my article, 'The Ecumenical Councils and the Conscience of

the Church', in Kanon: Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für das Recht der Ostkirchen ii (Wien 1974), pp. 217-33.

⁹One in Christ xiii, 3 (1977), p. 185.

¹⁰Truth and Authority, p. 21 (my italics).

¹¹Truth and Authority, p. 18.

¹²Compare Alexander Schmemmann, 'The Idea of Primacy in Orthodox Ecclesiology', in J. Meyendorff and others, The Primacy of Peter (London 1963), p. 30.