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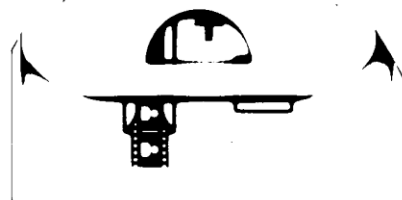
THE PAPAL SUPREMACY IN RELATION WITH THE UNITY AND UNICITY OF THE CHURCH  
( report submitted to the Joint Committee between Anglicans and Roman Catholics by L. Bouyer)

[ Dr Massey Shepherd ]

The basic manifestation, and even actualization, of the Church is in the local Church:  
where the eucharist is publicly celebrated and the life of charity embodied in a community  
of "neighbors". It has there its focus in the person and function of the local bishop.  
However, the local community gathered in the eucharistic celebration is only an epiphany  
of the one and same Church, present everywhere with Christ when two or three are  
gathered in His name. The members of the local Church are received everywhere as  
members of the Church, if their own local Church is representative of the true Church.  
The local bishop himself is not only the center of unity inside his local Church but also  
her link of unity with all the other local Churches, for he has become a local bishop only  
by being admitted into the college of the Catholic bishops through consecration by at least  
three of them. The primitive and essential meaning of concelebration is, when bishops  
meet together, to make clear and ensure that their various Churches are but one Church.

The unity of the Church universal is achieved first through the unity of faith (the  
same symbol is recited everywhere), then in sacramental unity (one eucharist, one  
episcopal body as there is one baptism). It is made fruitful through a cooperation in  
charity and in faith between the local Churches, everyone receiving from and communicating  
to the others in her own (or their own) spiritual and material goods and working together  
in missionary and caritative activities through the world.

The Church of Rome, according to the Catholic tradition, presides to that universal  
exchange of "agape". She is a local Church, as all the Churches are, but her local bishop,  
being the successor of Peter (as the whole episcopal college is the successor of the Twelve)  
has received, with the special responsibility which was that of Peter among the Twelve,  
the special gift which was promised to Peter by Our Lord to "confirm his brethren in  
the faith".



The special responsibility of Peter was to promote unity among the Twelve and then among the Churches they were to found: i. e., not a dead uniformity, but the living unity of a missionary Church to remain in expansion until the end of this world. Such remains, mutatis mutandis, the special responsibility of the Pope. Therefore the gifts received by the apostles as a college were also given to Peter as an individual: not to suppress or restrain the individual or collective activities of the Twelve, but to further the common activity of all of them in unity. From the account of Matthew, indeed, it seems that these gifts were even given to Peter individually before being granted to the whole college as such. The bishops, then, have succeeded to the Apostles, not to remake in their own way the work the Apostles had incepted, but only to maintain and develop it on the same basis and along the same lines which were those of the Apostolic foundation. Insofar, the Pope succeeds to Peter in the special task of safeguarding and forwarding the unity of the Church through her later developments. His activity cannot be conceived except on the Apostolic foundation, that nobody can ever remove, and inside the episcopal college, in connection with it. But there he is distinguished by a special responsibility, and therefore authority, for the living unity of the whole.

These characteristics of the bishop of Rome as successor of Peter must be understood analogically as all other ministries in the Church are, especially the episcopal ministry in general. Either the activities of the individual bishop in his own local Church or the common activity of the whole episcopal college in the whole Church are not intended to suppress or restrain the activities, and even initiatives, of the whole Church in all her members but to further them. In the same way, the exercise of the papal function is to lead and harmonize in unity the life of the whole. The function of the Pope as that of all the bishops is a service of the community: it is a ministerium, not a dominium in the sense of the old Roman law. For the unity which the Pope is not only to keep but to promote is not a dead unity: it is the unity of the divine truth in a life of love, of that

truth which is the truth of the divine self-giving love.

Therefore, as Saint Gregory I expressed it, the power of the Pope is not for a diminution of the power of the bishops (taken either individually or as a body) but for its support. In that very field of unity which is his proper sphere of activity, the Pope is not to act alone but to act in such a way as to lead and harmonize the activity of the whole episcopal body, and indeed of the whole ecclesiastical body. For the unity of faith and the unity of life in love springing from the sacramental life is inherent in that faith, that life, that love. Therefore, in all those who partake of the true faith and its sacraments, unity is an impulse of the Spirit and works through all kinds of graces and charisms. This is true both inside every local Church and in the common life of all the Churches in the one Church. But, just as the local bishop in the local Church has to lead the harmonious interplay of all the individual activities inside the common activity of the body, not as superimposing upon them a constrained unity but as being himself the servant and the instruments of that unity which is instinctive in the faith and life in love of each and all. So, in an analogous way, the Pope is to act concerning the whole Church and especially the whole episcopal body.

His universal responsibility and corresponding authority for the living unity of the Catholic Church is not normally to restrain but rather to support and harmonize the spontaneous cooperation of the local bishops, either in the local councils or episcopal conferences, or in universal councils, and, more generally, in all the common activities and common organization of all the activities that the Church can evolve through the various agencies of her members. The opposition between a conciliar Church and a papal Church, just as the opposition between a hierarchical Church and a Church of the laity (either presbyterian or congregationalist) could only arise when the papal or episcopal power came to be understood as a dominium and not as a ministerium. But, as soon as the

Church hierarchy is understood, as it should be, as a ministerium, all these oppositions vanish (which does not mean that there will arise no tensions, but that they will remain the healthy tensions of an organism where unity is not a dead uniformity but a dynamic equilibrium of life). This does not mean a capitulation of authority, but rather the opposite. For authority becomes the more ~~so~~ worthy of the reverence of all, and the more ~~so~~ steadfast in its own exercise when it is conscious (and makes the others conscious) that it is exercised not as an oppression of one on the others, but as a responsibility of one for the others, not to suppress or subdue their multiple activities, but to harmonize, and therefore to fulfill their own healthy development.

It is in the light of these considerations that the definitions of Vatican I are to be read and understood, as it has become clearer through the whole of the Constitution Lumen Gentium of Vatican II, but as it had been made clear already by the declaration of the German bishops after Vatican I and its solemn approbation by Pope Pius IX.

Papal solemn definitions concerning debated points of faith or Christian ethics were not said simply to be infallible, but enjoying that same infallibility which pertains to the Church as a whole. What does that mean? It means that if and when the Pope, acting in the fullness of his responsibility in and for the whole Church, issues a definition of the belief of that Church, God will preserve him of leading her into error, just as it is the case with a definition issued by an ecumenical Council, or, more generally and habitually, with any belief which, even without having ever been the object of such a definition by any legitimate authority, is accepted by the whole Church in common as an integral part of the Christian faith (as is the case with redemption by the Cross, which has never had to be defined either by Pope or Council). The Church as a whole has the promises of eternal life, and although all her members individually can err in many ways, Popes and bishops included, none of them can err in such a way as definitely to obscure the witness to the truth of the Church as the Church not of men but of Christ. To say that implies that

the different organs Christ has established in His own Church will ever be granted the assistance of His Spirit to preserve them (in spite of all their own defects, and in proportion with their various shares of responsibility for the life of the whole in unity) from leading her irrevocably astray.

That such definitions by a Pope are said to be infallible "ex sese et non ex consensu Ecclesiae" does not refer to the person of the Pope, nor even to his own office as seen in isolation, but merely to the fact of the definition itself, when it has been produced precisely in such conditions that he has been acting as the custodian and leader of the expression of the faith of the Church seen in her wholeness and unity. Therefore, it means only that such a definition has no need of any further confirmation a posteriori. But the discussions in Vatican I itself make it clear that it does not mean that the Pope, acting in such a way, acts as an isolated oracle, but rather that the definition considered has such an importance because he has acted only as the authoritative voice of tradition alive in the whole Church.

In the same way, the wider definition, in the same Council Vatican I, of the supreme power of the Pope as episcopal and ordinary does not mean that he can act as by-passing or suppressing the authority either of the individual bishops or of the whole episcopate, either dispersed through the world or congregated with him in Council. It means that his responsibility, and therefore authority, for preserving and fostering the unity of the whole Church in faith and the life of love is of the same order as that which pertains to every bishop in his own diocese and to all the bishops together, but with a universal extension which the authority of the other bishops has only when it is exercised collegially. It is ordinary not in the sense that it should (or could) act by continuous interference with the individual or collective exertions of the other bishops, but that it has a permanent capacity of intervening whenever and wherever it is needed for the sake of the unity of the whole and of the different parts as parts of the whole.

Moreover it must not be forgotten that, for the Pope, to have such a power, corresponding to his special responsibility, does not mean that every time he will exercise it he will act rightly. As even an ultramontane theologian as Cardinal Gasquet said it, it is quite another thing to say that Rome in a given case has acted validly and to say that it has acted rightly. It is only in some special and exceptional circumstances, very narrowly defined, that papal decisions (as well as decisions of the whole episcopal body) are to be considered as infallible (i. e. solemn definitions of faith or Christian ethics). And, even in such a case, it does not mean that the definitions will be the best possible, or that they will exhaust the problem raised. This has never been the case even with definitions of ecumenical Councils. These, as those of the Popes, are only believed to be protected by the divine Providence from leading positively the Church into error, because, owing to the responsibility of those who act in such cases, they publicly engage the Church as a whole, and the Church as a whole cannot fail entirely.

When all this has been seen, we can ask the question: What do we mean when we say that the Catholic Church is the one true Church, and her alone?

It must be answered that the one true Church is that in which there is the unity of the true faith and of the true life in love springing from the authentic sacraments of the true faith. For the maintenance of that unity, the Pope, and together with him the whole episcopal body in communion with him, is the supreme (although not the only) human instrument. Therefore, the fact that a local Church is in communion with the legitimate successor of Peter is a token of her being a part of the one true Church. However, that communion is not in itself and by itself the substance of the unity and unicity of the true Church of Christ. Her unity remains the supernatural unity of faith and the life of faith in love, of which the Pope is only an instrument and an expression. Therefore a Church, like the Orthodox Churches of the East, where the substance of the Catholic faith and

sacraments is preserved and fructifies in the life of love, although (through historical circumstances which are not all of them due to the responsibility her hierarchs, much less of her individual members) she lacks the actual fullness of communion with the Pope, remains a part of the one true Church, even if her situation, for that lack of communion, is abnormal.

The abnormality, however, is not wholly on the side of the Eastern Christians. The situation of the Western (or Eastern) Catholics in communion with the Pope is not itself fully normal as long as they are not also in communion with Churches who, for the essentials, keep the same faith and the same sacraments, and, through these heavenly gifts, the life of Christian love. I should not say that there is here schism inside the Church (according to the idea of Canon Greenslade), for that, as Bishop Christopher Butler in his book on The <sup>Idea?</sup> Unity of the Church has shown it convincingly, is meaningless, if we take schism in the meaning accepted by the ancient Christian tradition. But I should rather say that there is in such a case a schismatic tendency on both sides which has to be repented for and mended by a mutual effort toward reconciliation.

Concerning other Christian bodies, eminently the Anglican Church but also, more or less, the various Protestant Churches, where elements, even central ones, of the Christian faith and sacraments have been retained, and therefore of the Christian life of love, the situation is not the same. Here there is real schism which, as is always the case, either has been provoked (at least in part) by a tendency to heresy, or has allowed that tendency to develop. Nevertheless, the fact that such Churches, sometimes better than the one true Church, have kept and developed integral parts of the Christian heritage of faith and life in love, is a reproach to the whole hierarchy as well (and even more) as (or than) to all the members of that one true Church. It constitutes, for all those who are now, without any merit of their own, in the one true Church, but

whose actual realizations are far from exhausting her possibilities, a challenge not only to individual penitence but to collective reformation. Such a challenge will not have been answered properly as long as the fruitful developments of the Christian seed outside the visible pale of the one true Church will not have been restored to their proper place within her. Then only those who have contributed to these developments and who live by them will experience not a frustration but a newer and fuller development of what they already enjoy of authentic Christianity by their reintegration to the one true Church, which, even without their knowing it, remains their native home.