

PORINGLAND DOCUMENT ON CHURCH AND AUTHORITY

I

1. From the beginning of the Church the confession of Christ as Lord has been the heart of the Christian faith. This Lordship of Christ is fundamental because, through his obedience unto death, God exalted him by the Holy Spirit, giving him all authority in heaven and on earth. As Lord of the Church he bestows the Holy Spirit to create a communion of men with God and with one another. To bring to perfection this koinonia is God's eternal purpose, and the Church exists to serve its fulfilment when God will be all in all.
2. Through the Gift of the Spirit this apostolic community came to recognise in the words and deeds of Jesus the saving activity of God and their mission to proclaim to all men the good news of salvation. Therefore they preached Jesus through whom God has spoken finally to men, Inspired by the Holy Spirit they transmitted what they had heard and seen of the life and words of Jesus and their interpretation of his redemptive work. Consequently the inspired documents in which this is recorded came to be accepted by the Church as the authentic foundation of the faith. To these the Church has recourse for the inspiration of its life and mission; to these the Church refers its teaching and practice. Through these written words the authority of the Word of God is conveyed. Entrusted with these documents, the Christian community is enabled by the Holy Spirit to live out the gospel and so to be led into all truth. It is therefore given the capacity for assessing its faith and life and to speak to the world in the name of Christ. Shared commitment and belief create a common mind in determining how the gospel should be interpreted and obeyed. By reference to this common faith each individual tests the truth of his own belief.

II

3. The Spirit of the risen Lord, through whom the Christian community exists, continues to maintain the People of God in obedience to the will of the Father. Thus he safeguards their faithfulness to the revelation of Jesus Christ and equips them for their mission within the world. By this action of the Holy Spirit, the authority of the Lord is active in the church. Incorporation into Christ and obedience to him opens Christians to one another and makes them responsible for each other. But since the Lordship of Christ is universal, the community also bears a responsibility towards all mankind. This involves a participation in whatever promotes the good of society and a responsiveness to every form of human need. The common life in the body of Christ gives to each of its members, and to the community as a whole, what is required to fulfil this responsibility. They are thereby enabled to act and speak in such a way that the authority of Christ is mediated through them. In this sense Christian authority means that Christians may so act and speak in the name of Christ that through them men may hear the authoritative word of Christ.

III

4. The Church is a community which consciously seeks to submit to the Lordship of Christ. Each member of this community by sharing in the life of the Spirit finds within the koinonia the means to be faithful to the revelation of Jesus Christ. Some respond more fully to the call of Christ. For this reason they win a respect within the community that qualifies them to speak in the name of Christ with a certain kind of authority to their fellow members. But the Holy Spirit gives to some individuals or communities special gifts for the benefit of the Church. This second kind of authority concerns the right to speak within the Christian community and to be heeded because of an inner quality of life or of some special endowment of the Spirit.

5. Among the special gifts of the Spirit for the edification of the church is that of the episcope of the ordained ministry. The Holy Spirit commissions some through ordination for this special service to the whole community. Because the church exists where there is adherence to "the apostles' doctrine, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), they exercise a particular authority in ministerial functions related to these constitutive elements of the church. This pastoral authority is primarily exercised by the bishop, who has the responsibility of preserving and promoting the integrity of the koinonia. It is a service to further the church's response to the Lordship of Christ and its commitment to mission. Since the bishop has the general oversight of the community, he can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity in its daily life. However, he does not act in isolation; all those who exercise ministerial authority must do so in mutual responsibility and interdependence. This is a third form of authority: it means a service of the church, officially exercised only by the ordained ministers and intrinsic to the functions which structure the church, according to the mandate given by Christ and recognised by the community.

6. It is not solely the prerogative of the ordained ministry to perceive the will of God for the church. This requires the interaction of its members. By living faithfully the life of the koinonia, all may become sensitive to the way the Spirit is guiding the church. They are thereby led towards a deeper understanding of the Gospel and a recognition of its implications in the diverse cultures and changing situations of society. Those who are commissioned by ordination to discern these insights and give authoritative expression to their content are themselves involved in the community; they share its quest for understanding of the Gospel and obedience to Christ; they are receptive to the needs and concerns of all.

For its part, the community must respond to and can assess the discernment of the ordained ministers. In this way there takes place

a continuing process of discernment and response in which the faith is expressed and the Gospel is pastorally applied. Through this interaction the Holy Spirit manifests the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ so that the faithful may live freely under the discipline of the Gospel.

7. By the convergence and complementarity of these various means the Holy Spirit keeps the church under the Lordship of Christ. In fulfilling his promise that he will never relinquish his people, Christ takes full account of human weakness. Because the limitations and sinfulness of human nature are still evident in all Christians, the several authorities in the church never adequately reflect Christ's authority. The awareness of this inadequacy involves a continual summons to reform.

IV

8. The koinonia is not only realised in the local Christian communities: it is also to be realised in the communion of these communities with one another. The unity of local communities under one bishop constitutes what is commonly meant in our two communions by 'a local church', though the expression is sometimes used in other ways. Each local church is rooted in the witness of the apostles and entrusted with the apostolic mission; so, being faithful to the unique apostolic teaching, celebrating the same eucharist and dedicated to the service of the same Lord, it is a manifestation of the Church of Christ. Despite diversities each recognises its own essential features in the other local churches and therefore its true identity with them. Consequently the authoritative action and proclamation of the People of God to the world is not simply the responsibility of each church acting separately, but of all the local churches together. The faithfulness and spiritual gifts of one of them may be an incentive to the others. Each bishop, having the principal responsibility to ensure that the local church remains an authentic Christian community, has to make it aware of this universal communion to which it belongs. As bishop he expresses this communion of his church with the others; this is symbolised by the participation of several bishops in his ordination.

9. Because of this koinonia of the churches, the churches themselves need to meet together in order to discuss matters of mutual concern and to face contemporary challenges. Such gatherings may be drawn from one region or they may have a world-wide representation. This has happened from the earliest days of the Church, as is shown in Acts 15, where apostles, presbyters and the whole Church came together. It is through such meetings that the Church formulates its rule of faith and orders its life, guided by its determination to be obedient to Christ and faithful to its vocation. In all these councils of the Church, whether only of bishops, or of bishops, clergy and laity, decisions are authoritative when the common faith and mind of the Church are expressed in them. When bishops gather in what has traditionally been called 'an ecumenical council', they take decisions that are binding upon the whole Church, while a regional council or synod makes decisions only for the churches it represents. Such directions are to be received by the local churches as expressing the mind of the whole Church concerning God's will for them. Therefore, far from being a burden which is imposed, this exercise of authority is for the strengthening of the life and mission of the local churches and of their individual members.

10. Early in the history of the Church the bishops of important sees were entrusted with a function of oversight of the other bishops of their regions. Among the reasons for this development was the recognition that this pattern was pastorally necessary, in order to keep the churches faithful to the will of Christ. This practice has continued to the present day. This special exercise of the episcopate of this bishop is a service to the Church that is carried out in co-responsibility with the other bishops of the region. For every bishop receives in his ordination, together with the responsibility for the care of his local church, the obligation to maintain that church in a living awareness and practical service of the other churches, since the Church of God is found in each of the local churches and in their koinonia.

11. The true goal of this koinonia is the realisation of the will of Christ: 'Father, keep them in thy name. which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one' ... 'so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me' (John 17:11.21). The bishop of a principal see should seek the fulfilment of this will of Christ in the churches that are served by the bishops over whom he exercises this particular oversight. His responsibility is to help the bishops promote the mission of the church to the world, and in their churches right teaching, holiness of life and brotherly unity. When he perceives a serious deficiency in the life or mission of one of the churches it is his task, where necessary, to call the local bishop's attention to it and to provide assistance to meet it. If need be, he may call upon other bishops and their churches for this assistance. For the churches to be effective witnesses to Christ within their own social and cultural milieu, this sharing together and attentive concern for each other is indispensable. From time to time presiding bishops will have to assist the other bishops in attaining a common mind to deal with their shared difficulties and needs. History attests good and bad results stemming from the working out of these structural patterns for mutual service.

Within the context of this historical development the see of Rome came to be seen as the principal centre in matters concerning the worldwide Church. Consequently its bishop came to exercise primacy among the other bishops.

12. Already in the early Church this position of the see of Rome was related to the tradition of the death of Peter and Paul in this city. The special function of the bishop of this see was soon regarded as an expression of the will of Christ for his Church and explained by drawing an analogy between the position of Peter as first among the apostles and that of the bishop of Rome among the other bishops.

It was on the basis of this analogy that the First Vatican Council asserted the necessity of this service of unity for the whole Church.

The Second Vatican Council placed this ministry in the wide context of the shared responsibility of all the bishops. Nevertheless in 1870 it had already been said that the bishop of Rome's function, far from overriding the authority of each bishop in his own diocese, was to enable the bishops to fulfil their own ministry of oversight. The teaching of the Councils shows that communion with the bishop of Rome does not involve submission to an omnipresent authority, stifling the distinctive features of the local churches. The reason given for this episcopal function of the bishop of Rome is that it should be a service of the communion of all in Christian fellowship and in faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles.

Through the centuries both the theological interpretation of this primacy and the administrative structures through which it has been exercised have varied considerably. Moreover neither theory nor practice has always adequately reflected the ideals expressed above. Sometimes the exercise of primacy has been distorted by becoming overloaded with functions which had been assumed by the see of Rome but were not necessarily linked to the primacy. Sometimes its image has been obscured by the conduct of the occupant of this see and by interpretations given to this office. Sometimes external pressures have made its proper exercise virtually impossible. Nevertheless, rightly understood, the primacy implies that the bishop of Rome exercises his episcopal concern for all the bishops and their churches in order to guard and promote their faithfulness to Christ and to each other. To be in communion with him is thus intended as a safeguard of the catholicity of each local church; and so it is a sign of being in communion with all the churches which are in communion with him.

13. A local church cannot be truly faithful to Christ if it does not desire to foster this communion. Such communion compels all the churches to be concerned for mankind, to live as witnesses of Christ and to proclaim the Gospel; but fundamental to all these activities is

the sharing of a common faith. The heart of this common faith is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, crucified, risen, ascended and now living through his Spirit in the Church. He is the source of the Church's mission and life. Consequently, the prime concern of every local church must be to comprehend the significance of this faith, whose full dimension can only be found in the communion of all the churches for which the Spirit provides the appropriate oversight.

14. The character of the Church is determined both by its historical origins and by its mission to make the gospel relevant to every generation. The Holy Spirit constrains the people of God continually to call to mind the experience and witness of the apostolic community and, in the light of that, to discover the language that will effectively convey its meaning today. This looking back to the historical events of salvation is transformed by the Holy Spirit into a living memory - in worship, in reflection upon the Word and in its proclamation. In the eucharist the Church celebrates the Sacrament that Christ instituted as a memorial of the totality of God's reconciling action in him. Early in the Church the central articles of the faith were summarised in the baptismal creeds by the repetition of which Christians continue to confess Christ. All such remembrance is based upon the record of the apostolic witness in the Scriptures. Here also the preaching of ministers, instructions given by those who exercise oversight, and statements of local and universal councils have to find their ground and inspiration.

15. Since every succeeding generation must be helped to understand that, however diverse their cultures, the good news of salvation is also for them, it is not enough for the Church simply to repeat the original apostolic words. It has also prophetically to translate them in relation to the cultural context of the hearers. In this process the Church will come to see more clearly the implications of the gospel. Even if this further clarification is historically conditioned by the circumstances which prompted it, nevertheless some of its perceptions are of lasting

value in that they help to draw out the richness of Christian revelation. For this reason the Church has committed itself unreservedly to certain formulas as valid and necessary expressions of its witness to Christ. To say this is not to claim that these formulas are the only possible, or even the most exact way of expressing the faith, nor that they can never be bettered.

16. From the beginning the Church was aware of its responsibility for assessing the consistency of its teaching with that of the apostles. It had soon to determine which of the writings emanating from the apostolic age was intended by the Holy Spirit to constitute what should be the New Testament canon. This recognition was of fundamental importance in that henceforth this canon became normative for the rest of the Church's history. It also made it clear that the Church was conscious of the Holy Spirit's guidance in matters essential to its faith. With the same confidence the apostolic community had already made decisions of permanent value. The Church came to believe that its councils could also make authoritative declarations through the Holy Spirit, who enables the Church to see in them a genuine expression of faith.

17. Many complex historical factors affected the universal acceptance of the decisions of councils. Among the decisive factors was endorsement by the bishop of Rome, in virtue of his oversight of that local church to which a pre-eminent position was accorded. This was seen as a particular fulfilment of his responsibility towards the other local churches and their bishops for maintaining the whole Church in the truth. He judged this responsibility to include his personal intervention in controversies relating to matters of faith, sometimes on his own initiative and sometimes in response to appeals made to him.

18. Both our traditions believe that the Church's competence to make declarations in matters of faith which are of permanent value is a demonstration of Christ's fidelity to his promise that he will never abandon his Church, and that the Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth. Not all statements of the Church are of permanent value, and some have been mistaken. The Holy Spirit's guidance given to all believers may sharpen the awareness of some groups or individuals within the Church concerning certain aspects of the truth which others do not clearly perceive. Even some of the Church's accepted positions may thereby be shown to be inconsistent with the Gospel. Nevertheless, within the community the Holy Spirit charges the bishops with a special responsibility for discerning error and promoting truth. The proper interaction of these two operations of the Spirit in the Church is a safeguard of the genuineness of its faith. When the bishops exercise their responsibility collectively in authentic Ecumenical Councils, their decisions, made explicitly as guardians of the truth, possess a unique quality and authority; they are preserved by the Holy Spirit from error in faith.