

27.8.76 : 6.15 p.m.

ARCIC/156/18/2

PARAGRAPH 18

In its mission to proclaim the gospel the Church has the obligation and the competence to make declarations in matters of faith. This involves the whole people of God amongst whom some may perceive certain aspects of the saving truth more clearly than others. At times this results in conflict and debate in which customs, accepted positions, beliefs, formulations and practices may be shown to be inadequate, mistaken or even inconsistent with the gospel. When conflict endangers the unity of the Church or threatens to distort the gospel the Church must have some effective means for resolving it.

In both our traditions bishops have a special responsibility for promoting truth and discerning error. The interaction of bishop and people in the exercise of this responsibility is a safeguard of Christian life and fidelity. There is a day to day exercise of this responsibility which concerns the daily teaching of the faith and the ordering of life in the Christian community. Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that those who have a specific responsibility in the community will be automatically free from errors of judgment, will not tolerate abuses and will not distort the truth. No initiative or reaction on the part of any members of the community is exempt from the possibility of such failures. Despite the absence of this guarantee, we believe that Christ will not abandon his Church and that the Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth. Therefore we are confident in Christian hope that such failures will not destroy the Church's ability to proclaim the gospel and to show forth the Christian life. That is why the Church, in spite of its failures can be described as indefectible.

We believe that the Church, in times of crisis or where fundamental matters of faith are concerned, can make authoritative judgments which, though not exhaustive exclude what is erroneous and clarify the Church's understanding of the truth but do not add to it. Such judgments will possess a unique authority in that, whatever further clarification takes place, the truths they express will never be contradicted. This affirmation of unique authority is common to both our traditions with respect to the ecumenical councils of the first centuries.