

Paragraph 18

In its mission to proclaim and safeguard the gospel the Church has the obligation and the competence to make declarations in matters of faith. This mission involves the whole people of God among whom some may rediscover or perceive more clearly than others certain aspects of the saving truth. At times there result conflict and debate. Customs, accepted positions, beliefs, formulations and practices as well as innovations and re-interpretations, 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 its exercise is a safeguard of Christian life and fidelity. There is a daily exercise of this responsibility which concerns the teaching of the faith and the ordering of life in the Christian community. There is no guarantee that all those who have a day-to-day responsibility in the community will always be free from errors of judgement, will never tolerate abuses and will never distort the truth. This is equally true of any other member of the community. Nonetheless we are confident, with Christian hope, that such failures will not destroy the Church's ability to proclaim the gospel and to show forth the Christian life. For we believe that Christ will not abandon his Church and that the Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth. 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 when fundamental matters of faith are in question, can make judgements, consonant with Scripture, which are authoritative.

When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous. Though not exhaustive, they clarify the Church's understanding of the truth without adding to it. By the Holy Spirit the Church commits itself to them, recognising that, being faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition, these judgements are protected from error by the same Spirit. In the exercise of this solemn responsibility bishops share in a special gift of Christ to his Church. Therefore the authority of such judgements is such that, whatever further clarification or interpretation may be proposed, the truth they express will always be confessed. Not every conciliar decree has this binding authority which belongs only to those which concern the central truths of salvation. This authority is ascribed in both our traditions to decisions of the ecumenical councils of the first centuries.

Since our historical divisions, the Roman Catholic Church has continued the practice of holding general councils of its bishops which it designates as ecumenical. The churches of the Anglican Communion have developed other forms of conciliarity.