

13. A local church cannot be truly faithful to Christ if it does not desire to foster universal communion, the embodiment of that unity for which Christ prayed. This communion compels all the churches to unite in their concern for mankind, to live as witnesses of Christ and to proclaim the Gospel. But the foundation of this communion is the sharing of a common faith in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, crucified, risen, ascended and now living through his Spirit in the Church. Because of his perfect fidelity to the Father, Christ is the truth who directs the Church's mission and life. Consequently, a prime concern of every local church must be to enter into a deeper understanding of this faith, whose fulness is gravely obscured by schism.

14. The Church's life and work are shaped both by its historical origins and by its mission to make the gospel relevant to every generation. Through worship, through reflexion upon the Word and through its proclamation, and above all through the Eucharist, which makes present the totality of God's reconciling action in Christ, the Holy Spirit continually moves the people of God to the living remembrance of the experience and witness of the apostolic community, and, in the light of that, to discover the language which will effectively convey its meaning today. Early in the Church the central articles of the faith were summarised in the baptismal creeds by which Christians still continue to confess Christ. All such remembrance must be consonant with the apostolic witness recorded in the Scriptures, a witness in which the preaching and teaching of ministers, and statements of local and universal councils have to find their ground and consistency.

15. The Church's purpose in its proclamation is to lead men to an acceptance of God's saving work in Christ, an acceptance which requires more than intellectual assent and calls for the response of the whole person. In consequence, the gospel which the Church proclaims and guards is not primarily a series of propositions. Nevertheless propositional formulas are necessary for building up and safeguarding the Christian life of the individual and the community. But these in all cases are instrumental to the truth which they are intended to convey.

Since all succeeding generations, however diverse in culture, must be helped to understand that 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 context of the hearers. In this process the Church

may come to see more clearly the implications of the gospel. Even though this further clarification is historically conditioned by the circumstances which prompted it, nevertheless some of its perceptions may be of lasting value. For this reason the Church has committed itself unreservedly to certain formulas as authentic expressions of its witness to Christ, having a significance transcending the historical matrix in which they were first formulated. 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. In the 2nd century local councils were held at which the limits of the New Testament canon were determined, and this process of recognition has given the Church a canon that has remained normative. The right of a council to make such a decision at all in so momentous a matter rests on a certitude that the Lord himself is present when his people assemble 'in his name' (Matt. 18:20) and that the Council may say 'It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15: ). The authority exercised in the matter of the biblical canon is also applied to questions of discipline and fundamental doctrine. When the decisions ( as at Nicaea, 325) affect the entire Church and centre on controverted matters on which there has been wide and serious debate, it becomes important to establish criteria for the recognition and reception of conciliar definitions and canons. This process of reception is often gradual as the decisions of an important and widely representative council come to be seen in perspective and in relation to the Spirit's continuing guidance to the Church as a whole, and the faithful play a substantial part in this discernment.

17. Among the complex historical factors which contributed to the recognition of conciliar decisions special importance attached to their confirmation by the principal sees, and in particular by the see of Rome in virtue of its preeminent position. At a very early period the other local churches actively sought the support and approbation of the Roman see, and in the course of time came to regard its agreement as necessary to the validity of decisions in major matters of more than regional concern. This service was seen as a fulfilment of the responsibility of the see of Rome and its bishop towards the other local churches and their bishops for maintaining the whole church in the truth. Furthermore the bishop of Rome was led to intervene in controversies relating to matters of faith - in most cases in response to appeals made to him, and sometimes on his own initiative.