

Section V

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. 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. Consequently, a prime concern of every local church must be to enter into a deeper understanding of this faith, whose fulness and integrity are gravely impaired by division.

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 reflexion upon the Word and its proclamation, through worship especially baptism and the eucharist, the Holy Spirit continually moves the people of God to the living remembrance of Jesus Christ and of the experience and witness of the apostolic community. This remembrance assists the people of God in their search for language which will effectively convey the meaning of the Gospel today. All such interpretation 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 not only requires intellectual assent but also calls for the response of the whole person. For the clarification of what is believed and for building up and safeguarding the Christian life of the individual and the community, the Church has found it indispensable to use statements of belief in creeds and conciliar definitions. 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 to certain formulas as authentic expressions of its witness to Christ, having a significance transcending the historical setting 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. From late in the second 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 action of a council in making such a decision at all in so momentous a matter depends upon the assurance that the Lord himself is present when his people assemble 'in his name' (Matt. 18:20) and that a council may say 'it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28). The authority exercised in the matter of the 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 disciplinary decisions. This process of reception, in which the faithful play a substantial part, 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.

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 other local churches actively sought the support and approbation of the church in Rome, and in the course of time the agreement of the Roman see came to be regarded 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 local church of Rome and its bishop towards other local churches and their bishops for maintaining the whole church in<sup>the</sup> 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.