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Truth and Authority:

**A commentary on the Agreed Statement
of the Anglican–Roman Catholic
International Commission**

**AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH,
Venice 1976**

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Commentary

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Authority in the Church

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Introduction

In any statement concerning the being and nature of the Church the question of authority is among those that can easily become divisive. The degree of unease that may exist between Christian communions in their mutual relations is often determined by differing attitudes to authority. The Venice Statement agreed by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission in 1976 seeks to take an initial but not tentative step (and in this case above all it is the first step that is hard) towards transcending a point of deep traditional difficulty: the need for primacy in the universal Church and the nature and exercise of authority associated with that primacy. The method adopted by the Commission has not been to make a frontal assault upon an apparently impregnable fortress. The Venice Statement does not begin by stating the Roman Catholic position on papal primacy and infallibility as expounded in the official documents of the First and Second Vatican Councils and in ultramontane exegesis of them, continue by stating Anglican or conciliarist difficulties, and conclude by investigating what possibilities may remain of reconciling standpoints whose past statements have often looked as if they were specifically intended to be mutually exclusive. The Commission's statement seeks to begin not from existing lines which seem to move in parallel and never to find a meeting-point, but rather by examining first principles and considering how during the long course of the Church of Christ in the historical process the need to preserve unity and truth has been answered. The Commission's method has not, therefore, been to interpret church history in the light of criteria provided by the first Vatican Council but to try to see the decrees of 1870 in a broader context and in the light of general principles regarding authority which can be discerned throughout the progress of the Christian society and which

are also structural to the tradition of Anglican theology.

The commentary on the Venice Statement that now follows does not try to provide a detailed exegesis of it paragraph by paragraph, which would require a much more extended essay than this. It is the joint work of an Anglican and a Roman Catholic who have participated in the Commission's work and wish to acknowledge how profound an education that work has been. The commentary may provide readers of the Venice Statement both with a wider context within which it can be better understood as a whole and also with an elucidation of some particular points of outstanding importance.

From time to time the abbreviation DS is used in references for quotations especially from official documents of the Roman Catholic Church, and signifies the 33rd edition of Denzinger's convenient *Enchiridion* (Herder 1965).

The Meaning of Authority

It may be well to begin with a consideration of the meaning of the word 'authority', both within the Church and in a wider context. Although the word sometimes implies the power to compel compliance, authority is normally distinguished from power. Most characteristically it stands for an invitation and a summons to men to exercise their freedom in ways indicated by the bearer of authority. Even God, from whom all authority is derived, seeks from men free obedience, not forced servitude. When, on the contrary, authority relies too heavily upon compulsion, it lapses into what is called authoritarianism.

In the created order we need to distinguish between the authority which has its source in the inherent qualities of an authoritative person, group, or document, and that which springs from a delegation or mandate given to a person or group, or from a regulative status accorded to a document,

out of consideration for the authority of its authors or because it is adopted as a rule for thought and action by a community.

In the Christian community both inherent and mandated authority belong to certain persons and groups. Moreover the Church recognizes the peculiar authority of a collection of books, the Bible. All such authority not only derives from God, but exists solely to fulfil God's will for the salvation of mankind. The Commission's Agreed Statement on Ministry affirmed that this salvation comes about through the Church, which is a community (*koinonia*) of human beings who are reconciled with God and with one another in Christ, and who through this reconciliation become the means of reconciling others with one another and with God (*Ministry and Ordination* 3, 5). This new Statement takes a step further, and sees that all authority in the Church is for the building up of this reconciled and reconciling community (1, 5).¹ Christian authority, therefore, is not so much a power or a privilege as a capability of service.

The Statement speaks of several kinds of authority. First there is the authority with which the whole Christian community and each of its members face their fellow men and women. In so far as Christians believe the gospel and live by it, they possess an inherent gift which can elicit faith in others (3). Secondly, individual Christians bear responsibility in relation to one another. This may be an inherent authority which springs from the fidelity and holiness of their lives, so that 'they win a respect which allows them to speak in Christ's name with authority' (4). It may, on the other hand, derive from a particular gift or talent with which the Holy Spirit endows an individual 'for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ' (Eph. 4.12). The Statement refers to two Pauline passages in which

¹ References are to paragraphs of the Venice Statement, *Authority in the Church*.

such charisms are listed (5). They may be inherent qualities, like the 'utterance of wisdom' (1 Cor. 12.8), or mandated offices, like those of pastor or teacher (Eph. 4.11). In the Church this last-named pastoral authority belongs pre-eminently to ordained ministers, especially to the bishop, 'who is responsible for preserving and promoting the integrity of the *koinonia*' (5); here again the new Statement links with that on Ministry and Ordination. Although, as has been said, authority is basically an invitation to a free response, this pastoral authority must carry with it power to 'require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity in [the community's] daily life' (ibid.).

Scripture and Tradition

Since the Reformation, people have often written about the authority of scripture as if the Protestant and Catholic positions were irreconcilable. The Protestant attitude, it is said, is summed up in the phrase *Scriptura sola*, which is taken as implying that each individual, through pondering scripture for himself under the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit, can receive the fullness of revealed truth, and that the teaching of the Church cannot necessarily be relied upon but must be tested by each individual against the words of the Bible. The Catholic view, on the other hand, is expounded as a belief that there are two sources of revelation, namely scripture and tradition, and that some of the truths God has revealed are contained in tradition but not in scripture.

It is now generally recognized that neither Protestant *Scriptura sola* nor Catholic 'two sources' as outlined above can give a satisfactory account of revelation, and that the beliefs of the original Reformers and Counter-Reformers were not so sharply contrasted. Scripture and tradition are inextricably intertwined. The New Testament writings

themselves are the inspired reflection of certain communities and individuals within the Church on the traditions concerning Jesus Christ which they had received a considerable number of years after his death and resurrection. Moreover, the writings that form the New Testament are not the only ones which claim to contain divine revelation about Jesus; there are other works (which we now call apocryphal) written in the form of Gospels (e.g. of Thomas or James) or of Acts of various apostles. Scripture itself alone cannot be the criterion for determining the canon, for the problem is precisely to determine which books are authentically scriptural. It might, however, be conceded that all of this is true, but still held that, once scripture has been written and its canon established by the Church, a new situation obtains, so that now the only reliable and the fundamental test of belief is recourse to the words of scripture by the individual believer under the Holy Spirit's guidance.

This is not, however, a tenable position. In the first place, if we believe that the Church's judgement was inspired by the Holy Spirit when it crystallized the tradition into the written word, and later when it established the canon of scripture, there is no reason to say that it then lost the guiding hand of the Spirit and the power to discern in matters of faith. Rather, scripture was composed by the Church and authenticated by the Church, continues to be authoritatively interpreted by the Church and is applied to the new situations which each age brings. Secondly, and this is not just a debating point, *Scriptura sola* cannot be proved by scripture alone. Thirdly, in practice, to appeal to scripture as a test of faith is necessarily to appeal to a particular interpretation of scripture. Every heresy in the Church's history has been based on an appeal to scripture. For example, the Arians in the fourth century based their belief that God the Son was inferior to the Father and himself created by the Father on such texts as Proverbs 8.22:

'The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.' Exegesis alone could not decide between the Arian and the orthodox positions, because the dispute was concerned not so much with the meaning of a biblical author as with the right way to apply such texts to a situation which the author did not himself envisage, or with the validity of certain inferences drawn from the text which the author himself had not drawn. At such moments of crisis the Church lends its full authority to one interpretation of scripture rather than another because that best accords with its living experience of Christ through the Holy Spirit. In other words, the standard for measuring belief is not scripture alone, in the rigid sense of that term, but scripture interpreted according to the mind of the Church. Fourthly, it is a plain fact that every Christian's interpretation is coloured by the tradition in which he has been formed and in which he worships.

Accordingly the Commission, while affirming that the Church has recourse to scripture 'for the interpretation of its life and mission' and 'refers' to scripture 'its teaching and practice', speaks of scripture as 'a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith', rather than as the normative foundation of the faith itself (for that is none other than Christ); as the means through which 'the authority of the Word of God is conveyed', rather than as the authoritative word itself; it is by reference to the scripturally formed 'common faith' of the community that the individual tests his own belief, rather than by an appeal to the words of the Bible as to an ultimate authority (2).

On the other hand, this is not to accept a 'two-source' view of revelation. In propounding the faith the Church does not put forward under divine guidance facts which are not to be found in scripture, but determines how the gospel should be interpreted and obeyed. The true account of the relation between scripture and tradition does not lie either in a literal *Scriptura sola* theory, or in a theory of 'scripture

plus tradition'; but rather a genuine tradition is always an interpretation of scripture, and scripture is accepted according to the interpretation of the Church's tradition.

The Biblical Basis

'The confession of Christ as Lord is the heart of the Christian faith', begins the Venice Statement, with 1 Cor. 12.3 evidently in mind. He is the Lord who declares 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14.6). He sends out the apostles with his authority (Luke 10.16, 'He that hears you hears me'; Matt. 28.19-20, 'All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .'). The gospel message is to be received not as the word of man but as the word of God (2 Cor. 4.5; 1 Thess. 2.13). Those whom Christ sends are his empowered ambassadors (2 Cor. 5.20). Even where the apostle has no commandment of the Lord he has the right to give strong moral advice (1 Cor. 7.25) and is to be accounted steward of the Lord (1 Cor. 4.1; Titus 1.7 of the bishop). The Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone (Eph. 2.20). So the Church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3.15), as itself resting on the one foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3.11). The presence of Christ by the Spirit in and with the Church is a continuing gift to his people, 'guiding into all the truth' (John 16.13). So the promise to the Church is that built on the rock it will withstand all the powers of evil (Matt. 16.18). In the Epistle to the Ephesians the Church, which is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic (all four epithets are explicit or implicit in the epistle), is an essential part of the eternal plan of God for the salvation of humanity in Christ. The society which is to bring unity to mankind in Christ must itself be one, this unity being both given and an objective of continual striving.

The glory of the Head of the Church (Col. 1—2) is participated in by his Body which is therefore one (Eph. 4.4), even in face of much empirical evidence of separateness (as between Jewish and Gentile believers, Eph. 2). The apostles derive their authority not from a democratic and therefore revocable consent of the community, but from the Lord of the Church, who has given them power within the community to build it up (2 Cor. 10.8).

The Preservation of Authenticity by the Early Church

The truth to be secured is the salvation of man in Christ, of which the Church is the witness and guardian. Therefore the Church has to safeguard this truth against all attempts to transform the gospel in ways which prejudice this salvation; e.g. by a doctrine of the person of Christ which sees in him neither true man, in solidarity with the human race, nor the very presence of the Creator acting to redeem his own; or by a doctrine of man which regards man either as irredeemably depraved or as needing hardly more than a little firm exhortation and better education. 'Heresy' is not mere error, from which no man is immune, but a chosen rejection of the decision of the Church as a whole, necessarily taken to safeguard the truth of redemption in Christ and of the rational and moral understanding of this redemption transmitted in the continuing history of the Christian society.

The organs of authority for reaching decisions² are, first, the holy scriptures as the primary witness to the work of

² For a brief survey of early Christian conceptions of teaching authority see *Mélanges Yves Congar* (Paris 1974), pp. 163-76; full length studies are D. van den Eynde, *Les normes de l'enseignement chrétien* (1933); R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (1962); H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (1972).

God in Christ and 'the springs of salvation' (Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39, PG 26.1437); the summary of the basic essentials or doctrinal pattern given in the Rule of Faith, the shape of which is closely akin to the creed confessed in baptism; the tradition of the liturgy; the ministry in continuity and unity with the apostolic commission of Christ; and the common consensus and judgement of believers. The work of individual theologians contributes greatly to the general understanding of the tradition of faith and life to which scripture, creed, and liturgy are standing witnesses; and formally defined doctrines may owe much to their exploration of the treasure entrusted to the Church in the 'deposit' of faith (1 Tim. 6.20; 2 Tim. 1.14 shows that this deposit is not a rigid or static set of abstract conceptual propositions). Nevertheless the ultimate authority does not lie with the individual theologian, however great he may appear to his contemporaries and successors. A striking characteristic of some of the greatest theologians is their self-effacingness. Augustine, for example, is continually asking for criticism and correction, and abhors being treated as an 'authority' (in the sense of someone whose reputation and standing leads him to be believed without scrutiny of the reasons for his judgements).

The freedom of the individual theologian is at times in tension with the mind of the community, especially if he appears to challenge the conservative forces that may see in his freedom elements that are disruptive of the community's coherence. Nevertheless the tradition of theology, like holy scripture in the image of Gregory the Great, should be a river in which lambs may walk and elephants may swim (*Moralia in Job*, preface). It may frequently be the role and duty of official authority to keep legitimate options open. The issues may be very complex. In any event, on the one hand, conservative theology is grossly misrepresented if portrayed as a mere product of the more institutional and

official aspects of church life. In experience the contrast between orthodoxy and heresy does not correspond to the line between obscurantism and freedom. On the other hand, an individual theologian may feel in conscience obliged, for the sake of truth, or at least for the truth as he has seen it, to adopt a position that conflicts not merely with office and institutional authority but with good men who love God and have not seen things with his eyes. He may then appear a heretic in the sense defined above; and in his personal attitude there may well be a liking for the provocative and paradoxical and a considerable cloudiness of vision. Nevertheless in the long run the truth that he has seen may be that which the Church comes to acknowledge as her own.

The normal functioning of authority as guardian of truth in the Church takes place within the local church, in the diocese or the province or the natural unit of the community which may be determined by national and linguistic factors. But to preserve mutual brotherhood and a common mind, Christians need to meet from time to time in conference, and, in particular, bishops, to whom special responsibility is entrusted, in synod. In the early Church the first councils (concerning which only fragmentary information is preserved) were regional synods which sought to establish a common policy on such questions as the non-recognition of the charismatic Montanist movement or the date of Easter (Eusebius, *Church History* 5.23-4) or the limits of the New Testament canon (Tertullian, *de Pudicitia* 10). At first conciliar action was commoner in the Greek East than in the West. Tertullian says that in the Greek churches of his time synods were held to examine difficult and profound questions, and that these synods were held in awe by the faithful as a 'representation of the entire Christian name' (*on Fasting* 13). Councils were seen to be especially necessary when scripture was found to be unclear or where texts could be quoted on both sides on a controversial question such as

readmission of apostates and other grave sinners. In the time of Cyprian of Carthage in the middle of the third century the process of synodical consultation and decision was seen as a guarding of the fullness of catholic truth against partial and individual opinion.

Exceptionally a great issue in doctrine requires decision at the level of a widely representative council; in rare cases at a general or 'ecumenical' (world-wide) council. The ancient Church understood that if a major matter is left unclear by scripture or the rule of faith in the creed (or the tradition of the liturgy), then there is authority in the general judgement of the universal Church, which will be assisted towards a clearer apprehension and statement of a disputed doctrine in consequence of controversy. Nevertheless conciliar definitions are regarded by the Fathers of the Church as saying No to new errors, never Yes to new truths; and as expressing in better or clearer language what has been (explicitly) said from the beginning; yet as open to the possibility of improvement by later councils. Augustine in a famous passage (*on Baptism* ii.3.4) observes that in a complex question clarity may not be achieved quickly. And the ultimate acceptance by the faithful is the sign of truth in the Church. Hence the rejection of large councils such as Ariminum (359) or Ephesus (449) which were not accepted at Rome but otherwise seemed to lack no element, juridically or otherwise, necessary to the enjoyment of ecumenical status. So the Anglican Article 21 says that General Councils may err. The confirmation by the great sees and in particular by Rome is a vital part of the process of reception (which in antiquity was not understood as a merely juridical act of formal ratification).

The concept of orthodoxy in the early Church was not necessarily bound up with the use of a particular formula or form of words, though at all times in church history there has been a tendency in that direction. During the Arian

controversy of the fourth century Athanasius of Alexandria discovered that theologians in differing traditions can use directly contradictory terms and yet mean the same thing, just as they may sometimes use identical terms and mean different things. He repeatedly affirms that orthodoxy is more a matter of intention than of the formula used—not, however, in the sense that right doctrine is a wholly subjective attitude or aspiration, but rather that permanence in the truth is not secured by repeating identical words, since words derive their various meanings from usage within the tradition of different communities.

The nature of the authority attaching to general councils³ in the patristic age is not easily defined in precise focus. The councils of Nicaea (325) and to a lesser degree Chalcedon (451), decisive for the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation respectively, soon come to be looked back to as sacrosanct. The other great councils were joined with them to constitute a kind of canon, at first of four, then enlarged to seven, a number which was further extended by the Latin West but not by the Greek East. Among the first seven ecumenical councils the first four have retained a special place because of the gravity of their subject matter.

Among the local churches the ancient Fathers held the churches of apostolic foundation in special respect, and particularly the church of Rome where the apostles Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom. The position of the bishop of Rome seems to be subsequent to and consequent upon the special veneration in which the church at Rome was held. It was wise custom from early times to consult the

³ For a detailed examination of the status of ecumenical councils in Anglican thought see *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in honour of Georges Florovsky* (=Orientalia Christiana Analecta 195, Rome 1973), pp. 393-408. On the relation between general councils and primatial authority in the early Church see W. de Vries, *Orient et Occident: Les Structures ecclésiales vues dans l'histoire des sept premiers conciles œcuméniques* (Paris 1974).

Roman see on difficult questions of doctrine (Innocent I in Augustine, *Epist.* 181-2). At least from the mid-third century onwards, and especially from Damasus (366-84) onwards, the Petrine text of Matt. 16.16 comes to be quoted at Rome (or by controversialists elsewhere who needed Rome's support) as providing the scriptural ground for this special position. The most notable climax of this development is Pope Leo the Great's 'Tome' of June 449, issued as an authoritative pronouncement on the Christological debates dividing the Greek churches, made in virtue of Leo's inheritance of Petrine office. In Leo's eyes his Tome made the eastern emperor's ecumenical council superfluous and certainly made synodical debate of its content inappropriate (*Epist.* 82; 90; 93-4). Leo sees Roman primatial leadership as merging with a final authority in dogmatic definition for the entire Church. The Greek bishops at Chalcedon in 451 (as indeed Western bishops at Milan or in Gaul) welcomed the Tome, not, however, because of Leo's authority in promulgating it but because after due examination they found it to be in accord with the orthodox tradition verified from other sources as well.

The ancient Church did not use the words *infallibilis* and *infallibilitas*, which are twelfth-century coinage. That the Fathers held firmly that God's truth declared in Christ is faithfully preserved in the Church, is not in the least in doubt; but they do not express themselves in the language of infallibility. This does not mean, however, that they regard defined doctrine as a hazily uncertain or relativistic or subjective matter. The function of definition is to guard, as best human words may, the redemption which Christ has achieved and which is mediated to, in, and through the community of apostolic faith and tradition.

The Truth of the Church's Teaching

In the preceding sections we have discussed briefly the Church's need of an authoritative interpretation of scripture and an authoritative application of scripture to the problems of each age; we also spoke of the organs by which, from the time of the early Church, this authority was exercised. Pre-eminent among these organs were the Ecumenical or General Councils.

The dogmas proclaimed by General Councils are not arbitrary definitions of faith; they articulate the scripturally-based faith of the whole Church. Such authoritative articulation in words is sometimes necessary; for the faith which all Christians share is primarily a personal faith in Jesus Christ, and only secondarily the ability to make orthodox statements of belief about him (cf. 14, and p. 19 above). Belief in the 'sense of the faithful' or *sensus fidelium* does not imply a belief that every Christian is a reliable exponent of theology.

An authentic dogmatic definition will not only articulate the belief of the faithful, but will also be recognized by them as a valid expression of their faith. The Venice Statement discusses this important subject of the *reception* of conciliar definitions at some length (16-17, 19; cf. 9). It avoids two extreme positions. On the one hand it rejects the view that a definition has no authority until it is accepted by the faithful, and derives its authority solely from that acceptance; 'when the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous' (19). Equally the document denies that the Council is so self-sufficient that it owes nothing to reception by the faithful. Subsequent recognition by the Church has sometimes been the criterion for distinguishing between Ecumenical Councils and those of lesser authority, and between those statements of a General Council which consti-

tute dogmatic definitions and those which do not.⁴ Subsequent recognition by the Roman see came to be seen as the decisive stage in this process of the recognition of a council (17).⁵ To repeat the words we have written (p. 17 above) 'the ultimate acceptance by the faithful is the *sign* of truth in the Church'.

The views we have expressed in the preceding paragraph accord with the teaching of both the Thirty-nine Articles and the Second Vatican Council. Article 21 states that 'General Councils . . . may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God.' What we have written is consistent with this affirmation; for not every assembly which has claimed to be a General Council has been recognized as such by the Church; nor is every theological statement of a genuine Ecumenical Council an authoritative definition of the Church's faith which the Holy Spirit has preserved from error. The Decree on the Church of Vatican II states: 'To the resultant definitions [of General Councils] the assent of the Church can never be wanting, on account of the activity of that same Holy Spirit, whereby the whole flock of Christ is preserved and progresses in unity of faith' (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 25, tr. W. Abbott). It follows from this statement that the absence of the assent of the

⁴ On the decisive importance of subsequent recognition of councils, see p. 17 above. It was not until the sixteenth century that a list of generally accepted Ecumenical Councils began to be determined in the West. The recent discussion by theologians whether the assertion that all mankind is descended from an historical Adam forms part of the Council of Trent's dogmatic definition on original sin or is merely an inessential presupposition, exemplifies the process of subsequent reception by the Church of particular parts of a conciliar decree.

⁵ Thus in Roman Catholic ecclesiology the pope is not only the primate among the bishops gathered in council (though usually playing no direct part in the discussions and preferring to be represented by a legate), but is also the primate of the faithful who subsequently accept the conciliar decisions.

Church would show that there had been no authentic conciliar definition of faith.

Questions that Remain

Paragraphs 1-23 of the Venice Statement set out an agreed understanding of the need for a universal primacy in the universal Church. But questions remain not about the basic principles of primacy but about the kind of authority to be associated with it. The Roman Catholic tradition has seen the bishop of Rome as possessing by God's will a unique function in the episcopal college, taking different forms at different times in history, but possessing the duty and the right to invite the following of all the faithful, and therefore being also the focus of teaching authority with a safeguarding power of definition in matters structural to Christian faith and ethics. This Roman Catholic tradition can be presented in brief and perhaps oversimplified terms as a belief that the Son of God founded his Church on Peter and the apostles; that the Pope and bishops are to the end of time the juridical inheritors of the powers the Lord entrusted to his Church on earth; and that these powers include not only primatial leadership but also a prophetic teaching office (commonly called 'infallibility') inherent in Christ's promise to be with his Church always.

The Anglican tradition has regarded this doctrine of authority in the Church as one-sided and as needing to be qualified by (a) appeal to the sources of apostolic faith and life in the scriptures, (b) the ancient catholic tradition, especially as enshrined in the decisions of the ecumenical councils of the undivided Church, (c) reason. Accordingly the Anglican tradition has seen the problem of authority in the Church in terms of a need to preserve a balance between several elements, and has therefore felt that a true and proper understanding of truth and teaching authority in the

Church is unlikely to be found centred upon one particular bishop, whose judgement can at times be coloured by his background and national culture and who, because of this concentration of authority in a single person, can escape the checks and balances provided by other norms of authority.

The tradition of Anglican scholarship has in general been unsympathetic to Protestant inclinations to ignore either the leading position of St Peter among the apostles attested in the New Testament or the good historical reasons for accepting that he was martyred in Rome. But the conventional deductive arguments of Counter-Reformation apologetic for Roman primacy and infallibility have left Anglicans unconvinced because of weaknesses in their biblical and historical base and because of a tendency for apologists to read back later developments into the early history of the Church.

The consensus reached at Venice in paras. 1-23 seeks a different ground for affirming Roman primacy which is not tied to a particular view of certain biblical texts and which can coexist with more than one kind of church government, in particular with what could be a more 'open' style of control than past experience has traditionally associated with the Roman curia. The argument of paras. 1-23 recognizes the diversity of authority in the Church and seeks to reaffirm the synodical conception of ecclesiastical government. At the same time a council needs a president if it is to be called and to work effectively, and the synodical idea presupposes primacy. There is nothing in the conciliarist principles, so congenial to the Anglican tradition, which requires the rejection of primacy as such, but rather the reverse.

Para. 24 specifies four areas in which the Commission is not yet in a position to say that it has reached a clear agreement which it is bold enough to submit to the judgement of the Church. That does not mean that on these points it has reached deadlock but cannot summon up courage to admit it.

The Commission is first inviting the study of its general approach to the question of primacy in the universal Church. If the principles set out in paras. 1-23 are accepted, then other questions become corollaries or secondary matters, important indeed, but not the starting-points of the discussion. It may be taken for granted that there will be readers of the Venice Statement for whom this approach to the subject will seem surprising, who will assume that it is necessary to reach agreement on particular items in the language of the first Vatican Council before passing on to more general propositions. The four questions specified in para. 24 are clearly regarded by the Venice Statement as subordinate to the broader issue.

Moreover, the four points mentioned are of differing importance and weight.

(a) First, to provide sufficient ground for affirming a Petrine or universal primacy exercised by the bishops of Rome, it is not necessary to interpret the Petrine texts of the New Testament in the particular manner characteristic of past apologetic. Naturally the Venice Statement does not deny that the New Testament attributes to St Peter the leading role among the apostles;⁶ nor does the Commission's agreed view mean that St Peter's position is irrelevant to the papal position today, or that the continuous line of tradition associated with Roman authority is to be apologized for. Acceptance of the Roman primacy does not depend upon applying to the pope everything which the NT says of St Peter.

(b) Secondly, there is the language of 'divine right'. The term, which is far from clear, has received much scrutiny

⁶ See *Peter in the New Testament: a collaborative assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars*, ed. R. E. Brown, K.P. Donfried, and John Reumann (1973).

in recent years from theologians. It can have at least two senses in Roman Catholic theology. First, it can imply that a state of affairs could not have been otherwise, because God willed it so and Christ ordained it so; in this sense the Church celebrates the Eucharist by 'divine right'. Secondly, it can apply to the particular form in which God's will and Christ's ordination have been realized in the Church under guidance of providence; in this sense the seven sacraments are matters of 'divine right', not because Christ explicitly founded seven in his lifetime, or because the number must necessarily be seven (it was not until the twelfth century that there emerged general agreement about the number seven), but because the Church has been disposed under providence to adopt the system of seven sacraments in fulfilment of Christ's intention that his saving work should be realized in the celebration of symbolic acts, such as the Eucharist. This second interpretation of divine right is applied to the papacy by the Commission, which sees no matter for disagreement in holding that 'the universal primacy of the bishop of Rome is part of God's design for the universal *koinonia*'.

To speak of universal primacy as the Commission has is to imply that all churches ought to be in communion with one another and with Rome, and that, if they are not, something is lacking in their catholicity, that is, in the universality of the one communion and fellowship to which they belong. The question is whether or not to lack this bond of communion with the universal primate deprives an ecclesial body of an essential mark of the Church and has fatal consequences. The greater the emphasis that is placed on what is lost by separation, the harder it is in practice to conciliate separated brethren. That something important is lost is non-controversial. But is that which is lost of such gravity that a church whose communion with the universal primate has not yet been restored is simply a deceit and counterfeit,

a body whose word and sacrament are robbed of all reality? The language of controversy in the past has at times indicated that Roman Catholic controversialists are inclined to give an affirmative answer to this question. Pope Paul VI's reference to the Anglican Communion as a Sister Church, in his homily on the occasion of the canonization of the English and Welsh Martyrs on 25 October 1970, shows that this approach is no longer representative.⁷ There is, therefore, reason to encourage the more hopeful view which recognizes that all separation inflicts loss and injury on the Church, but that the acceptance of this proposition does not entail a paralysing refusal to accept any hand of reconciliation to bring this loss and injury to an end.

(c) Thirdly, there remain difficulties concerning the infallibility of the universal primate, which was defined at the First Vatican Council in 1870 in these terms:

When the Roman Pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, in fulfilment of his office of pastor and teacher of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church, through the divine assistance promised to him in St Peter, he enjoys that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer wished his Church to be endowed in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals; and therefore the definitions of the aforementioned Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church (DS 3074).

⁷ There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and the worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Catholic Church—this humble "Servant of the Servants of God"—is able to embrace her ever beloved Sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ: a communion of origin and of faith, a communion of priesthood and of rule, a communion of the Saints in the freedom and love of the Spirit of Jesus' (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 62 (1970), p. 753).

The wording of the definition at first sight might suggest (and it was so interpreted by many Roman Catholics in and after 1870) that the pope's authority to define doctrine binding on the consciences of the faithful is absolute, personal, and separate; standing above the Church as a whole and all the episcopate. The formula is anti-Gallican (and anti-Constance) in insisting that the pope is not subordinate to a general council and that the validity of his decisions does not depend upon ultimate reception by the faithful. However, the official exposition of the decree at the Council by Bishop Gasser⁸ made it clear that the pope's infallibility is not *absolute*, for the definition confines the exercise of this prerogative strictly to matters of faith and morals where there can be no question of legitimate options being left open to any true Catholic, and where he speaks manifestly as teacher of the universal Church on doctrinal issues concerning which it is indispensable to preserve the deposit of faith; nor is it *personal* in the sense of belonging to the pope as an individual, for it belongs to him only in the exercise of his office at particular moments; nor is it *separate*, as if the pope were exempt from the need to consult. On the contrary, 'the pope is bound by his office and the gravity of the matter to take the means apt for ascertaining the truth and enouncing it. . . . Finally, we do not in the least separate the pope from the consent of the Church, provided that consent be not put as a condition, be it antecedent or consequent consent.'⁹ As the matter was left in the incomplete council of 1870, however, the impression was inevitably left that other bishops had a deeply subordinate authority in the definition of doctrine. The stress

⁸ His exposition is to be found in Mansi 52. 1204-32; and in convenient summary in Cuthbert Butler, *The Vatican Council 1869-1870*, 2nd edn (London 1962), ch. 23.

⁹ C. Butler's summary, *op. cit.*, pp. 388-9.

of Vatican II on collegiality goes far towards adjusting the balance.¹⁰

The decree of Vatican I itself does not attribute to the pope an independent kind of infallibility, but regards the papacy as one of the organs of the infallibility of the Church. The Venice Statement appends a footnote, which does not merely observe that the term infallibility has a technical sense in dogmatic theology, but also implies that the infallibility in teaching authority which the 1870 decree ascribes to the pope as teacher of all Christian people has no different sense from that in which the term may be used of the teaching authority of the Church expressed through synodical action, which paras. 15-19 of the Venice Statement seek to express.

Newman saw the 1870 formula as a major defeat for the 'insolent and aggressive faction' that had called for the definition hoping for something far less restrained which would cover even the Syllabus of Errors. He wrote to Mrs Froude:

I have no hesitation in saying that, to all appearances, Pius IX wished to say a great deal more, (that is, that the Council should say a great deal more) than it did, but a greater Power hindered it. A Pope is not *inspired*; he has no inherent gift of divine knowledge. When he speaks *ex Cathedrâ*, he may say little or much, but he is simply protected from saying what is untrue.¹¹

¹⁰ Newman was one of those who thought that the balance needed adjusting. He wrote to Mary Holmes: 'The dogmas relative to the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation were not struck off all at once but piecemeal—one Council did one thing, another a second—and so the whole dogma was built up. And the first portion of it looked extreme—and controversies rose upon it—and those controversies led to the second and third Councils, and they did not reverse the first, but *explained* and *completed* what was first done. So it will be now. Future Popes will explain and in one sense limit their own power' (*Letters and Diaries*, xxv, p.330).

¹¹ *Letters and Diaries*, xxv, p. 299.

The affirmation of 1870 that papal definitions are 'irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church (*ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae, irreformabiles*)' is easily misunderstood. The intention was neither to exempt the universal primate from the obligation to inquire into the mind of the Church (though the request that the formula should carry a clause stating that a definition would be invalid if this inquiry had not first been conducted was refused out of the prudent fear of endless disputes whether inquiry had been sufficiently thorough); nor to claim that such definitions are the Church's last word in any matter, permitting no restatement in other terms. The phrase was intended as a rejection of the fourth of the Gallican Four Articles of 1682, which stated that the pope's 'judgment is not irreformable unless the consent of the Church be given to it' (DS 2284), and no wider implications should be read into it. The central point of the clause is that a papal definition, made under conditions that satisfy the stringent requirements and qualifications written into the 1870 decree, does not require subsequent ratification by a general council before it can possess juridical validity.

The Venice Statement goes on to express a further difficulty in the same matter. The two recent exercises of papal infallibility have been concerned with Marian dogma, namely the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950). Was there sufficient urgency to justify the pope's invocation of infallibility? And were the doctrines fundamental enough to justify their being proposed as articles of faith? However, to question, as Orthodox as well as Anglicans do, the propriety of defining doctrines when definition is not called for as the answer to a threat of heresy, is not necessarily to deny the truth of those doctrines. Devotion to Mary enjoys an official place in Anglican worship, as the presence of the feasts of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, the Visitation of the

Virgin Mary, the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, and the Conception of the Virgin Mary in the Calendar of the 1662 Prayer Book shows. It would clearly be prejudiced to assume that the existence of the two Marian definitions constitutes an insurmountable barrier.

It is well known that the popes concerned not only sought to discover the mind of the Church before promulgating these two definitions, but could be said to have responded to an initiative arising from the Church at large. That formal heresy was not the issue is certainly true; but the definitions are sometimes explained as reactions to excessive Marian devotion carrying dogmatic consequences which authority could not support. More positively, it can be said that the magisterium was seeking to articulate with theological precision the instinctive devotion of the faithful at the request of the faithful. No less significant than the definitions, perhaps, was the resistance to widespread pressure for the definition of such titles of Mary as that of Mediatrix of all Graces. Moreover, recent pronouncements have implied that Marian doctrine is an object of faith, not in isolation, but because of its Christological and soteriological implications, and that Marian devotion should always bear a 'biblical imprint'.¹²

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception declares that Mary was prepared to be the Mother of the Lord in that she was preserved, by anticipation of the redeeming merits of her Son, from original as well as personal sin. It does not attribute to her a grace which is independent of Christ, or imply that she was in no need of redemption; nor is it

¹² Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* ('To Honour Mary', CTS 1974 (Do 462)), 30. The bishops at Vatican II refused to devote a separate decree to the Blessed Virgin, as some among them had wished, and decided instead to express their mind on that subject in the course of the decree on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, because she is a member of the Church, although a unique one, and is the Church's 'type and outstanding model in faith and charity' (*Lumen Gentium*, 53).

concerned simply with a 'privilege' of Mary, but rather with the holiness required in one who was to reply 'Fiat' to the divine plan of the Incarnation, and to become the mother of God the Son made man. For this reason the doctrine manifests, in the person of Mary, the truth that God's grace shapes his servants into persons who will be able freely to co-operate with his will for them.

The dogma of the Assumption affirms the Blessed Virgin's 'perfect configuration to the Risen Christ', her already complete entry into the glory of heaven, not as a disembodied spirit freed from the burden of a material body, but with her full human dimensions of body as well as soul. Again the doctrine looks beyond Mary, seeing her as the 'image' and 'proof' of the 'full glorification' which is 'the destiny of all those whom Christ has made his brothers, having "flesh and blood in common with them" (Heb. 2.14; cf. Gal. 4.4)' (*Marialis Cultus*, 6). The doctrine, therefore, is by implication a statement about the salvation of all believers. Many will feel uneasy about a dogma which seems to assert as of faith that, as a matter of historical fact, her body departed from this world, even though there is extant no evidence to this effect dating from the first four centuries of the Christian era. But it has been pointed out that, as the nature of the identity between a person's earthly body and his glorified body is uncertain, to say that Mary is, body and soul, in the glory of heaven is not necessarily to make an affirmation about the condition of her earthly body.

Nowadays Roman Catholics are reluctant to claim infallibility for more than a very few papal pronouncements; the only generally acknowledged examples over the last two centuries are the two Marian dogmas discussed above. It might seem, therefore, that the insistence upon papal infallibility is much ado about relatively little. Yet the pope's pronouncement of infallible statements, like his exercise of the universal immediate jurisdiction discussed below, is the

extreme and uncommon instance of a much wider authority that is attributed to him. As universal primate his teaching responsibilities most commonly require the enunciation of the Church's faith in circumstances in which infallibility does not need to be invoked; and even in the exercise of infallible teaching, the pope is concerned most typically as the president of the college of bishops, that is, the one with whom the general council must be in communion, and to whom the decisions of a council are referred for their ratification. The occasions on which the universal primate will need to pronounce infallibly apart from a general council will be exceptional; but by asserting his right so to pronounce the Council was affirming by implication his wider teaching authority.

(d) The fourth difficulty expressed in the Venice Statement concerns the theory and the exercise of papal primacy. The definition of 1870 claims for the universal primate not only the power to inspect other dioceses and to issue general regulations, but also immediate jurisdiction over every diocese.¹³ Such direct power seems to undermine the authority of the local bishop and to leave the door open to arbitrary interference from Rome. However, this attribution of immediate power to the pope is counterbalanced by the statement that there is no intention of detracting from the

¹³ 'If anyone says that the Roman Pontiff has only the office of inspection or direction, and not the full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole Church . . . or that this power of his is not ordinary and immediate, whether over each and every church or over each and every one of the pastors and the faithful, let him be anathema' (DS 3064).

authority of bishops.¹⁴ Nor was the definition intended to imply that bishops are only delegates of the pope; but to be in full communion with the bishop of Rome is, explicitly or implicitly, to acknowledge his jurisdiction.

Yet much has been obscured by the fact that the 1870 council did nothing to clarify the way in which, in practice, the pope would exercise immediate jurisdiction in a diocese so as to strengthen rather than undermine episcopal authority. Two principles were enunciated: primacy is for the sake of unity;¹⁵ primacy strengthens the position of bishops—and that is all. It therefore seems that if, *Deo volente*, organic unity is ever established between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church, it will be necessary to define more exactly the limits of the exercise of the primatial authority which Anglicans will be embracing. But reunion cannot be built on canonical definition alone. The Venice Statement welcomes the tendency 'to replace the juridical outlook of the nineteenth century by a more pastoral understanding of authority in the Church'. It was in this

¹⁴ 'This power of the Supreme Pontiff is so far from impeding the ordinary and immediate power of episcopal jurisdiction by which bishops, who have been appointed by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 20.28) to be successors to the apostles, as true shepherds feed and direct the flocks that have been assigned to each of them, that it [the bishops' jurisdiction] is affirmed, strengthened, and vindicated by the supreme, universal shepherd. . . .' (DS 3061). When the direct exercise of papal authority in a diocese other than the pope's own diocese of Rome is described as 'ordinary', the word is not meant to imply that the exercise will be of normal occurrence; it is a technical term describing a power which belongs to an office-holder by virtue of his office and not by delegation.

¹⁵ The Petrine office is said to be a 'perpetual principle and visible foundation of the unity' of the episcopate and of the whole Church (DS 3051). The purpose of the primacy is declared to be that 'by preserving unity, both of communion and of the profession of the same faith, with the Roman Pontiff, the Church of Christ may be one flock under one supreme shepherd' (DS 3060).

spirit that the pope addressed these words to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in 1967:

Should we try once again to present in precise terms what it [the papacy] purports to be: the necessary principle of truth, charity and unity? Should we show once again that it is a pastoral charge of direction, service and brotherhood, which does not challenge the freedom or dignity of anyone who has a legitimate position in the Church of God, but which rather protects the rights of all and only claims the obedience called for among children of the same family?¹⁶

The exercise of the pope's immediate jurisdiction outside Rome is extremely rare, even rarer, perhaps, than the exercise of his infallible teaching authority. The bishops at Vatican I were hard put to it to find examples. Much more frequently felt in the modern Church, and therefore much more likely to cause friction, is the exercise of indirect authority, through the frequent issue of directives concerning such subjects as the celebration of the liturgy, the training of the clergy, etc. Roman Catholic administration has become much more centralized even in the last hundred years. Many Anglicans would also regard as an insuperable moral obstacle to reunion the apparent necessity to lay themselves open to regular censure and disciplinary action coming from the Vatican. This objection is to do with practice rather than faith or theology; it invites Rome to exercise a more open and less centralized form of government and to encourage a greater measure of pluriformity in church life.

There is already evident in the Roman Catholic Church a tendency to decentralize the proceedings of government in such matters as matrimonial cases. Moreover, it is frequently

¹⁶ Quoted in G. Sweeney, 'The Primacy: the Small Print of Vatican I', in *Clergy Review*, Feb. 1974, p.96. The reader will gain considerable illumination from this article.

pointed out by Roman Catholic theologians that the present powers of the pope represent a combination of powers under two different titles. On the one hand there are powers which are attributed to him as universal primate, and which are based on the Church's inherent need of a ministry of universal unity; but there are other powers which he holds as patriarch of the Latin Church, which is only a part of the Roman Catholic Church. In the early centuries the pope was seen to be a regional as well as a universal primate; his authority in practice impinged much more nearly and frequently upon his own patriarchate of the Latin-speaking countries centred on Rome than on the patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria, or Constantinople. If the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church were ever united, it might be under such a system. The Anglican Communion would be a patriarchate, in full communion with the Roman See. If intervention in an Anglican diocese were necessary, it would be made in the first instance by the Anglican primate; the bishop of Rome would step in only when all else had failed. The Anglican patriarchate would enjoy its own canon law, just as do the Uniate Churches in communion with Rome today. It is true that the term 'uniate status' is not without uneasy overtones, as some of the Uniate Churches have an insecure existence as small groups, following the liturgy of the Orthodox Churches, regarded with suspicion by their fellow-countrymen who are not in communion with Rome, and feeling sometimes that their difficulties are not fully understood in the Vatican. One would hope that the position would be very different for an Anglican Uniate Church which was not a small group that had broken off from the main Anglican body, but the main Anglican Communion itself. Pope Paul's homily at the canonization of the English Martyrs, quoted above, gives grounds for this hope. Such was the vision of Cardinal Mercier, who used the phrase 'united not absorbed'. How-

ever, the Commission's responsibilities lie in theological not in juridical matters. The reflections contained in this paragraph are intended simply to indicate possibilities.

A theologian will probably judge that these four difficulties are of varying, and indeed ascending, magnitude; that in the case of the first two, the more clearly they are formulated, the nearer they get to evaporation. The third, concerning infallibility, is much more serious; but even here we feel that agreement is certainly not beyond the range of hope. We believe that what is said in the Venice Statement goes a very long way towards the clarification and therefore towards the elimination of the obstacles. The question of the Marian definitions needs further study, but agreement is certainly not out of range.

The fourth difficulty, concerning jurisdiction, is likely to be regarded by theologians as the most serious, partly because of past practice, partly because the limits of primatial jurisdiction are unspecified. The difficulty springs in some considerable degree out of the juridical language itself. As we have tried to indicate above, the more this exercise of primacy is, and is seen to be, an exercise of true pastoral care, the nearer the difficulty is to elimination.

Authority in the Church

A STATEMENT ON THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY
ITS NATURE, EXERCISE, AND IMPLICATIONS

Agreed by the Anglican-Roman Catholic
International Commission

Venice 1976

Text of actual
document not
scanned.

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The Status of the Document

The document published here is the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. It presupposes the Commission's agreed statements on Eucharistic Doctrine (1971) and Ministry and Ordination (1973).

It is at present no more than a joint statement of the Commission on the final item in its programme of work. The authorities who appointed the Commission have allowed the Statement to be published so that it may be discussed by other theologians. It is not a declaration by the Roman Catholic Church or by the Anglican Communion. It does not authorize any change in existing ecclesiastical discipline.

The Commission will be glad to receive observations and criticisms made in a constructive and fraternal spirit. Its work is done in the service of the Church. It will give responsible attention to every serious comment which is likely to help in improving or completing the result so far achieved. This wider collaboration will make its work to a greater degree work in common, and by God's grace will lead us to the goal set at the beginning of Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue: 'that unity in truth for which Christ prayed' (Common Declaration of Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury, March 1966).

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