

ANGLICAN REFLECTIONS ON THE VENICE STATEMENT

The Venice Statement on Authority in the Church – the third and, for the present, last Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission – deserves to be accepted by Anglicans without reserve, if not without qualification. If this happens, it will be an important step for Anglicans on the way of ecumenism, the way to the reunion of Christians in one visible Church on earth. Not that the Statement is free from the drawbacks of the earlier Statements. There is still a certain studied ambiguity, there is still a tendency for the members

of the Commission to find their unity in the common presuppositions of their cultural background – that of Western liberalism – rather than in a faith not drawn from human opinion but received from God.¹ Indeed the tendency to find unity in common cultural presuppositions has made its mark on the Statement at a fundamental level: for the notion of 'primacy' that forms the central thread of the Statement is very much one of a chairman with certain executive functions – just the sort of colourless, but easily defined and articulated concept

that suggests itself to the Western liberal consciousness. But in this Statement — for Anglicans, at any rate — all this pales into insignificance beside the clear and unequivocal recognition that there is authority in the Church, and that this authority is manifested in the hierarchy of the Church (not *only* there, of course, but at least there). So of the *episcopus* of the ordained ministry, possessed in its fulness by the bishop, but also by other ordained ministers (see the Canterbury Statement), we read: 'This service of the Church, officially entrusted only to ordained ministers, is intrinsic to the Church's structure according to the mandate given by Christ and recognized by the community.'⁽⁵⁾ 'When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous.'⁽¹¹⁾ This recognition of the authority of Christ genuinely exercised through the Church, through its structure and hierarchy, is of deep significance for Anglicanism.

Not that it is new within Anglicanism. Classical Anglican theology, as we meet it in, say, the Caroline divines, has a clear grasp of the indefectibility of the Church. Scripture, tradition, the decisions of general councils, the celebration of the faith in the liturgy, the proclaiming of the faith in preaching, pondering on the faith in the heart of the individual believer — all this has a rôle in bringing to expression the charism of indefectibility that the Spirit gives to the Church. Classical Anglicanism was loath to define this more precisely. Scripture is sufficient: but Scripture within the Church, and within a Church that is no mere juridical entity, but the believing, worshipping, loving People of God. But the fundamental dogmatic tradition was not then challenged, and so the imprecision of the Anglican understanding of this expressed only its deep sense of the mystery of God, a mystery deepened, not dispelled, in his revelation of himself and his Love in the Incarnation, a mystery apprehended most surely by the *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium*, the feel for the faith possessed by all those who live the faith of Christ, who live in the Spirit.

The situation has become somewhat different in recent decades. The acids of liberalism (more pervasive than powerful, it is true) have eaten away at the fundamental dogmatic tradition, and the fact that liberalism is narrowly intellectual has given the theologian — the 'expert' — an undue prominence in the task of apprehending the Christian faith, a prominence that risks a virtual papacy of scholarship. This leads to a fundamental distortion of the Anglican position. The theologian appears to be the one who is closest to the authority that resides in the Christian mystery. He appears to be the one who can most faithfully declare the Christian message. This is not his rôle, and he rightly disclaims it. It is in this context that the Statement's clear assertion of the authority manifested in the Church's hierarchy, a hierarchy whose fundamental purpose is pastoral, is of such importance. For the Church, in confessing Christ and preaching the Gospel, does and must

embody his authority. The Church is not just an aggregate of those engaged on the religious quest; the Church is the place where those who have apprehended God's self-manifestation in Christ live out their response of faith and love. The Church is not just a group seeking God, more fundamentally it is a group sought out and found by God, by a God who as man came to seek and to save that which was lost. In the context of a weakly asserted dogmatic framework, where the authority of the saving events is only dimly and uncertainly perceived according to the whim of individual theologians, Anglicanism too easily becomes simply a *soi-disant* 'humble' search for God, and loses hold on the fundamental fact that this search is our response to God's having sought and found us, and that the Church embodies his authority. For Anglicanism once again to discover herself as a *Church*, a Church subject to the authority of Christ and embodying that authority, would be of value both to herself and to all Christians. For then the riches of her own tradition could be released and so enrich the Church as a whole, instead of being — as now — largely constrained, and often even shyly concealed. To see in the Statement Anglicans' clear recognition of the authority of the Church, their recognition of the need for this to be symbolized in the Petrine Office, and their willingness to submit to it — not in any servile way, but so that they might find a greater freedom: to see this is to glimpse again the glory and joy of Anglicanism.

The scope of the Venice Statement is both broader and narrower than consideration of the Petrine Office. It is broader in that while it is constructed towards a consideration of the Petrine Office, it is concerned more generally with authority in the Church. And that authority is many-sided. It is important, too, to remember that it is an *agreed* statement, and therefore concerns matters of agreement — and also matters worth agreeing on. There are, for instance, but a few lines on the intrinsic authority of holiness, but that is not because such authority is undervalued by either of our traditions. One consequence of reunion for Anglicans would be that we would enter into deeper communion with those great examples of heroic sanctity of the Roman Church whose authority we already willingly — and eagerly — concede. Roman Catholics would also find that we Anglicans have something to offer here. (A.J. Festugière's book on George Herbert is a delightful recognition of this). But we do not need to *agree* on the authority of holiness: one cannot but respond to it — hence its brief mention in the Statement. But however briefly mentioned, these other forms of authority are important and the authority of *episcopus* cannot be considered in isolation from them. Rightly understood in fact the authority of *episcopus* is there to bring to fruition in the life of the Church the manifold forms of the authority of the *sensus fidelium*. The authority of the hierarchy and the authority of the *sensus fidelium* complement one

another. In a not dissimilar way, in the authority of the hierarchy there is complementarity between conciliarity (which Anglicanism has traditionally stressed – as has the Eastern Orthodox tradition) and primacy. It is this complementarity that is developed by the Statement into a way of approach to their consideration of the Petrine Office (19-23). (For a proper appreciation of the Statement here, as elsewhere, the masterly commentary, *Truth and Authority*, by E.J. Yarnold S.J. and Henry Chadwick must be consulted. The reader will gain considerable illumination from it.³ It is lucid, concise and deeply learned.) It is necessary to observe, however, that the scope of the Statement is also narrower than consideration of the Petrine Office. For the Statement, the Petrine Office is the ultimate primacy. As regional councils, brought together to assert and effect the unity of the local churches in a region, evolved the need for a primate who would call such councils together and preside, so the universal church requires both an ecumenical council and a universal primate. But to see the Pope as the ultimate chairman, the summit of the organisational unity of the Church, expresses only a part of the understanding of the Papacy in Roman Catholic theology. In its section on 'Problems' (24) the Statement has this to say of the 'Petrine texts': 'Claims on behalf of the Roman See as commonly presented in the past have put a greater weight on the Petrine texts than they are generally thought to be able to bear. However, many Roman Catholic scholars do not now feel it necessary to stand by former exegesis of these texts in every respect.' That is certainly the case, but does not bear on the fact that in Roman Catholic theology the Papacy is seen as the *Petrine* Office: the Pope is the successor of Peter, not necessarily, or even especially, in any juridical sense, but rather in that his universal pastoral office, in accordance with Christ's promise in John XXI, is an office of leadership of the whole Church. Much of this is affirmed – it must be said – concerning the universal primacy, in the Statement. But the notion of the Petrine Office can be treated in a way that is freer of the organisational and administrative overtones of the concept of a universal primacy.

This is made clear in several of the articles in a recent issue of *Una Sancta* devoted to the theme of 'Binding Teaching'.⁴ The article by the Catholic, H.J. Pottmeyer, discusses 'The Tension of Office and Charism in the Petrine Office'. Pottmeyer's argument is to question the dichotomy between Office and Charism, a dichotomy much too easily taken for granted in theological discussion. Instead of separation and dichotomy between office and charism, Pottmeyer sees that Office is regarded in the New Testament as a Charism and that in the Office of ministry in the Church there is therefore not a separation from Charism, but a tension – a fruitful tension – between Office and Charism. It is, he argues, particularly important to be sensitive to this

tension when considering the Petrine Office. Infallibility is to be seen as the charismatic aspect of that Office. Infallibility is not some sort of magical property of the Papacy, still less a consequence of the constitutive rôle of the Papacy in the hierarchy of the Church, but is a Charism, a gift of the Spirit, that is given to the Pope for his exercise of the universal pastoral office that he bears. 'That ecclesiastical tradition assumes not only a chance coincidence but an inner coherence of Office and Charism is grounded in the conviction that the service of leadership can be undertaken and expressed only in the name of Jesus Christ, with his mandate and in his power. So the Office, which is transmitted in sacramental ordination, remains as a sacramental expression of the fact that Christ alone is the Lord of the Church and leads his Church, and that it is he who lends fruitfulness to the service of the shepherds. The unity of the Petrine Office and the charism of infallibility in the case when the existence and truth of the Church is at stake, is the final consequence of this conviction.'⁵ Pottmeyer concludes his article by saying, 'If the Petrine Office is to be a real service to a united Christendom, then it must not be thought of in trifling terms. Neither a purely representative primacy of honour nor the executive organ of a synodical board would do justice to the Petrine Office that the world awaits. Universality cannot be acquired through what is not binding. Such solutions would simply be a denial of the understanding of the Petrine Office as a Charism.'⁶

This and the other articles in this issue of *Una Sancta* could be regarded as complementing and deepening the approach of the Commission. N.A. Nissiotis (Orthodox) emphasizes that the teaching authority of the Church can only be properly exercised if it is recognised that the teaching Church is not to be identified with only a part of the Church. K. Lehmann (Catholic) seeks to develop an understanding of the teaching authority of the Church that frees it from juridical and merely formalist notions, and relates it more closely to the life of the Church, to her 'lived faith'. His development of the notion of *sensus fidei* (Glaubenssinn), the sense, or the feel, of faith, is very important. He defines this *sensus fidei* as 'a quasi-instinctive ability of the faith to remain true to her mysteries, to discern them and to distinguish them'. Rational and affective, ethical and spiritual elements are bound together in this 'feel of faith'. Its source and basis is the Spirit, it is the ultimate criterion of theological knowledge. It is in this context that the Church's *magisterium* must be understood. G. Siegwalt approaches the Petrine Office as the Office of unity (Amt der Einheit) from a Lutheran point of view. He argues that the Lutheran understanding of the Church solely in terms of the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments is inadequate. This office of 'building-up' needs to be supplemented by the office of unity that the Petrine Office provides. The only

depressing article is an Anglican one on 'Anglicans and the Papacy' by J.R. Wright. Whereas all the other articles grow out of real self-criticism and penitence, here we have a pretty complacent Anglicanism. That Anglicans might have something to receive in accepting the Petrine Office seems remote from this article. But it is only as Anglicans are willing to receive that they will discover how much they have to contribute in a re-united Catholic Church.

The contrast between this issue of *Una Sancta* (at least the European part of it — Wright is an American) and the Venice Statement is instructive and perhaps points the way forward for Anglicans and Roman Catholics. The Venice Statement is judicious and balanced and comes out of a careful engagement with the historical tradition of the Church. The commentary by Yarnold and Chadwick is an impressive example of how historical scholarship can break down misunderstanding and help one to see from a truer perspective what is really involved in the universal primacy of the Pope. As we see how it grew up and understand the context in which it could be exercised, our understanding is deepened, and in particular Anglicans may be brought to a readiness to acknowledge the Petrine Office. The articles in *Una Sancta* are much more theological than historical, and in particular Pottmeyer's article brings out the symbolic value of the Petrine Office, which is something charismatic and transcends the basically organisational model suggested by universal primacy. There is something of the same theological sensitivity to a possible Petrine Office in the article by the Lutheran, Siegwalt. The Anglican (or perhaps simply English?) tradition of historical scholarship and the German genius for theological insight ought to be complementary. It may be that the immediate way forward for Anglican-Roman Catholic Unity will be by serious engagement in the Anglican-Lutheran conversations. As often, genuine ecumenism advances on all fronts together.

The Statement brings Anglicans to the point where they are able to acknowledge the value of the Petrine Office for the Church. From Anglicans, then, the Statement calls for a welcome without reserve. But the articles in *Una Sancta* perhaps suggest that Roman Catholics might be expected to be less enthusiastic. If Anglicans are asking for the Petrine Office, it is up to Roman Catholics to see that it is the true Petrine Office that we are offered, and not something either emaciated by theological qualification or distorted in its exercise. Theologically we may wonder whether the Statement allows the full reality of the Petrine Office to be discerned — for

it is only that, as Pottmeyer says, that will be a real service to a united Christendom. As far as the exercise of the Petrine Office is concerned, it seems that it is not the extraordinary exercise of that Office (to which the charism of infallibility attaches), that is the real problem, but its ordinary exercise. As Chadwick and Yarnold observe, it is less the exercise of the infallible teaching authority and the Pope's immediate jurisdiction that is likely to cause problems for Anglicans, as 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.'⁷ and the exercise of his wider teaching authority.⁸ And here the concern is not so much with the actual exercise of this authority — Anglicans, in England at any rate, are familiar with a much less responsible and sensitive use of such authority by their own primate — as with the papal 'infrastructure' that is the means by which this authority is exercised. This is too much fashioned on a 'diplomatic' model with the implied confusion of *sacerdotium* and *imperium*, which recent attempts to make the papacy less centralized and more constitutional do not touch at all. Both at the level of theological exposition, and at the level of the way in which the Petrine Office functions, the Venice Statement calls on Roman Catholics to give us the true Petrine Office, in which the Church can once again find and express her unity and speak to the world the saving Word of Christ, with his authority, in an unfragmented way; and this not only on behalf of Anglicans, but of all Christians who genuinely long for the fulfilment of our Lord's prayer that 'all may be one.'

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1. See further for this criticism: A. Louth: *Commentary on the Agreed Statement on Ministry and Ordination* (Church Literature Association, 1977) pp.12f. and *passim*.
2. References to paragraphs in the Agreed Statement. The Agreed Statement is published by the Catholic Truth Society and SPCK as *Authority in the Church*. It is available from the same publishers with a commentary by E.J. Yarnold S.J. and Henry Chadwick, with the title *Truth and Authority*. Grove books publish the Statement with a commentary by Julian Charley: *Agreement on Authority* (Grove Booklet on Ministry and Worship No.48). Also available from the same source is *Authority and Ministry* by John Goldingay (No.46).
3. See *Truth and Authority*, p.34, n.16.
4. Heft 4, December 1976.
5. *Op. cit.* p.306.
6. *Ibid.* p.309.
7. *Truth and Authority*, p.32.
8. *Ibid.* p.30.