

## AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH: A Protestant Comment

### A French Protestant Comment on the ARCIC Statement

There has been little comment in France, not even in the religious press, on the third Agreed Statement produced by the Anglican/Roman Catholic group of theologians who met in Venice in September, 1976. The text of the statement, under the title *Authority in the Church*, was made public in Rome and Canterbury during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 1977. A French translation of the text was published in *Documentation Catholique* on 6th February, together with a long critical analysis by Fr Christopher Dumont, a consultant of the Secretariat for Christian Unity.

It was at a meeting of the Anglican/Roman Catholic Preparatory Commission in Malta in 1968 that the following subjects were identified as points of particular difficulty between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church:-

*The Eucharist*, covered by the Agreed Statement adopted at Windsor in 1971;

*The Ministry*, which was the subject of the meeting at Canterbury in 1973, and on which also an important statement was adopted;

and finally *Authority in the Church*, and in particular the question of the primacy of Peter, the subject of the text discussed below.

The climate of the conversations has changed remarkably during these six years. In 1971 the Catholic Church insisted that the Windsor Agreement should be kept 'top secret' for an unspecified period of time, and it was only through a somewhat picturesque indiscretion that the press got hold of the text — it was left on a Roman tram! In 1977, by contrast, it took only a month or two to settle certain details before making the contents known to the whole Christian world. It will be appreciated that the International Commission responsible for the production of the three Anglican/Roman Catholic Agreed Statements is an officially constituted body, by contrast with the Groupe des Dombes which is an unofficial group of French and Swiss theologians, choosing its own members. It is moreover significant that an observer from the World Council of Churches was allowed to attend the conversations, namely Dr Gunther Gassmann, of the Strasbourg Centre for Ecumenical Studies.

It is not possible within the limits of a short article to undertake an exhaustive analysis of so rich a document. Still, the method used, which Fr Dumont describes as 'inductive' (he has no hesitation in pointing out that it will bewilder many Catholics who are accustomed to traditional deductive theology) makes it possible for Protestants to follow without difficulty the firmly evangelical approach of this Agreement.

Starting from the lordship of Christ, the authority of the revealed Word, and the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit, the Statement sets out to look afresh at the authority of the Church, at the various gifts that are bestowed, and at the balance between an episcopal order and the participation of the whole community. There follows a study of *koinonia*, in the sense of communion between churches, in which two kinds of complementary authority are exercised: conciliarity and primatial authority, respectively.

At this point there comes very properly a reference to the historic role of the See of Rome, seen 'in the wider context of the shared responsibility of all the bishops... to guard and promote the faithfulness of all the churches to Christ and one to another'; the catholicity of each local church being a sign of the communion of all the churches. Over the years this ministry has been enlisted in the service of doctrinal reformulations, which nonetheless preserve intact the faith of the traditional creeds.

An important chapter in the Statement sets out honestly the reservations and difficulties which remain beyond this consensus. Anglicans disagree with Catholics over the use and interpretation of the traditional Petrine texts; they find confusing the somewhat superficial use of the concept of 'divine right', they question the dogma of infallibility, and are not disposed to accept the universal and immediate jurisdiction which Catholic ecclesiology seems over-ready to attribute to the Bishop of Rome.

In their conclusions, the anglican and catholic representatives are careful to note that this statement, with the two others, provides an important clarification of points at issue between the two churches.

Protestants may perhaps be wondering in what way they are involved in the beginnings of this return of Anglicans towards communion with the Church of Rome. This is not a silly question. In any case, it is from this angle that Fr Dumont seeks to evaluate the statement. We can appreciate the attractive candour of his judgment:- 'From a first reading of the statement one draws a very favourable impression, of a fine and lively theological synthesis, appropriate for persuading the Anglican partner that an office of universal *episcopo*, such as is traditionally associated with the Bishop of Rome, rests on good foundations. On this ground we can describe it as very remarkable.'

From another angle, there are certain dignitaries and theologians of the Church of England who do not hesitate to say, in all humility, that the vocation of their church is to disappear, in order to further the reconstitution of the Body of Christ.

For those who are in any way interested in the direction ecumenism has taken in recent years a 'return to the fold' on the part of Anglicans is as unlikely as it is undesirable in the present

circumstances. That is not where we are. Even if, with the *Tablet* (22 January), we take the view that the agreement on Authority in the Church marks a decisive step forward, and that Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue has reached a peak, it still remains true that history is not wiped out over night. The rejection of papal authority as it was practised in the 16th century played a central part not only in the birth and consolidation of Anglicanism, but also in the shaping of Great Britain as an insular political force.

What Fr Dumont seems to have failed to realise is that this very fact of Anglicans and Catholics quietly tackling together the problem of the relationship between *episcopo*, council and primacy, all as serving the fellowship of the churches, means henceforth an irreversible change in the way the papal office is understood. There can be no question whatsoever of the Church of England abandoning its characteristic features: its comprehensiveness which accepts the existence of groups Protestant in character, side by side with those which are 'high church' and very close to Catholicism. No more, on the ecclesial plane, could there be any obscuring of the sense of communion which characterises the relationship of bishops and primate (the Archbishop of Canterbury), or of the fundamental role played by the laity in the synodical life of the church.

If, as seems likely, this drawing together which has been initiated is meant to be carried further, it must necessarily imply not only that the medieval, monarchical and authoritarian image of the papacy must be abandoned, but that also the Roman Catholic Church must formally acknowledge the loss it suffers without the Anglican Communion.

Returning to the question posed above — Are we, as Protestants, involved in all this? — let us recall that during the first years of the ecumenical movement (1919-35) the Church of England, with such men as Archbishop William Temple, acted as a bridge between the churches of the reformation and the Orthodox Church. Catholic in its ecclesial structure, its liturgy and its episcopate which claims the apostolic succession, Protestant in its style of preaching, its catechesis, its Prayer Book and in the part played by the laity, it is a kind of 'hyphen' (or link) church. Does its present direction point to a deliberate choice? Is Canterbury opting for Rome and turning its back on the reformation? Nothing can be less certain. But in their search for unity Anglicans are taking certain calculated risks with Rome.

The work that has gone on between the two churches over the years is both clarifying itself and taking shape. In a sense it is the work of a scout or pioneer. Nor must we forget that in 1971, on precisely the same dates at the beginning of September, both the Groupe des Dombes and the Anglican/Roman Catholic Group at Windsor, in their respective fields, were able to adopt an agreed text on the Eucharist.

There is a significance in this convergence. If Protestantism is within the *Una Sancta* and does not refuse a place in its catholicity, sooner or later it will inevitably have to face certain questions which relate to the very being of the Church and, consequently, its witness in the contemporary world. Among them, the ministry of unity, the role of the episcopo, but also the problem of a place, of an organisation or structure which can be a kind of communion of the different communions, are bound to arise sooner or later.

For the moment perhaps we have something to learn of our Anglican brothers — their quiet pragmatism, their flair for taking the heat out of debate, their concern for the positions of the other church even, perhaps above all, when they appear quite unacceptable, overcoming their fear and breaking out of the structures of the past.

GEORGES APPIA

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