

A Comment on the ARCIC Statement on Authority in the Church.

(Prof. J. Speigl, professor of early church history at the University of Wurzburg made the acquaintance of the Venice Statement at a recent "Pro Oriente" meeting in Vienna. He sent the following comment, which has been translated from the German).

Good and acceptable agreement seems to have been reached as regards the more substantial aspects of the problem of authority.

Since the Commission was concerned with the differences that have divided Catholics and Anglicans in this matter, the historical presentation of the problem at times tends to concentrate on these two churches and thus narrows the perspective. Above all, the text proceeds too rapidly from a discussion of authority in the local church to the level of the universal Church, that is to say, to the Pope (pp. 11-12). This may create the incorrect impression that all churches have always considered the agreement of Rome to be necessary for all decisions that are of more than regional importance, the 'causae maiores' for example. But there were churches that never had the experience that their decisions were in some way dependent on Rome's agreement. This becomes important, for example, if one wants to understand some of the old Eastern Churches in the ecumenical dialogue about the problem of authority.

It seems to me that the description of the infallibility of councils in Section 19 is not satisfactory. The tone is too self-assured and could well be attenuated by the occasional insertion of a 'we believe that'. The way the text talks about 'central truths' conjures up a quite inappropriate idea that in important problems there is a certain point at which the assistance of the Holy Spirit ceases. Rather than persisting with such a concept, the text should state in a positive manner the purpose or the main purpose for which the Holy Spirit grants His aid.

Section 24A could provide an ever more comprehensible summary of the various positions. Roman Catholic theologians regard the passages about Peter in the New Testament and the important part that Peter played in the early Church as the basis for looking upon the Bishop of Rome as the successor in Peter's ministry or for justifying at least the beginnings of the development of his primacy. But this interpretation, which sees Mt 16,18 as pointing to a ministry for the maintenance of unity, can be found only from about the middle of the third century onwards and was never the predominant view among the Church Fathers, still less their only one. Other theologians, therefore, do not regard this passage as having the force of an absolute proof justifying the papal ministry.

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