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ARCIC 211/Infallibility/2

1. It is Christ who by his authority commends the Gospel to us through his Church. To believe is to be associated with all the people of God, who are one with the Lord and look to the testimony of the prophets, saints and martyrs in every generation. The Church as a whole, a living organism, is witness, teacher and guardian of the truth, possessing overall authority and in matters of doctrine is ultimately protected from error by the Holy Spirit (Cp. Venice 18 a). Doctrinal decisions of the Church must be consonant with the faith of the community grounded in Holy Scripture and interpreted by the mind of the Church in its transmission of the Gospel. No teaching authority in the Church can add new revelation to the original deposit (Cp. Venice 2 and 18).

2. This teaching authority of the Church is exercised through various instruments and agencies (cp Venice 9 and 18-22). 'If God's will for the unity in love and truth of the whole Christian community is to be fulfilled, (a) general pattern of the complementary primatial and conciliar aspects of episcope serving the koinonia of the churches needs to be realized at the universal level' (Venice 23). When matters of faith are at stake decisions may be made by universal councils and we are agreed that these are authoritative.

3. In a reunited Church we recognize the need for a universal primate, generally accepted,

who, presiding over the koinonia, can speak authoritatively for all the churches. However, the welfare of the koinonia does not require that all such pronouncements would be considered as permanent expressions of the truth. The object of this service could not be to add to the content of revelation, but to recall and emphasise some important truth; to expound more lucidly; to correct new errors; to draw out implications not sufficiently recognized; and to show how Christian truth applies to contemporary issues. They would elucidate, define or articulate matters of faith which the community implicitly believed. But situations may occur where serious divisions of opinion on crucial issues of pastoral urgency call for a more binding statement, which even those who disagree would be bound to accept. In any case the judgement would be an expression of the mind of the Church, understood not only in the limitations of time and place but in the light of the Church's whole experience and tradition. Even if such judgements were provoked by specific historical situations they would be of universal application because they would be rooted in the apostolic tradition and in the continuing life and common mind of the faithful. If such definitions were held to be protected from error, the emphasis would be rather upon this continuity as guaranteeing their truth than on the personal charism of their authors. No one claims that either general councils or universal primates are preserved from error in everything they say, even when they speak authoritatively.

4. Roman Catholics believe that absolute infallibility is proper to God alone and if the bishop of Rome is, in some exceptional circumstances, spoken of as infallible, this infallibility is always limited and conditioned. (DS.3074). They hold that the bishop of Rome speaks with the same infallibility promised by Christ to his Church when he makes a pronouncement which satisfies rigorous conditions, some of which were laid down by Vatican I. When he exercises this charism he speaks not only as bishop of Rome but as the focus of the koinonia. He must speak freely, without being under duress from external pressures and must make it clear that, after seeking to attain a full awareness of the mind of the bishops and the Church as a whole, it is his intention to issue a binding declaration upon a matter of faith and morals.

The content of such definitions must be intrinsically related to the revelation given in Jesus Christ. What is essential to the definitions is not the form of language in which they are expressed but the truth which they are intended to convey. The language may be interpreted and changed to make the truth clearer. The truth so proclaimed must never be isolated from the whole of Christian truth, and has always to be interpreted in its light.

The assistance of the Holy Spirit is given to the bishop of Rome in the service of revelation, not to add to revealed truth but faithfully to safeguard it. The purpose of such infallible discernment is only to declare that a certain truth is vital to the maintenance of the Gospel, even if it has a secondary rank in the hierarchy of truths.

If the Church is believed to be maintained in the truth by the Holy Spirit, and if the truth which has been defined is a genuine part of the revelation, then the churches will come to recognise that the definition is true because it emanates from the same Holy Spirit (see Venice 16). Acceptance by the Church as a whole must not be confused with an official approval by the bishops as necessary authentication. The phrase 'such definitions are irreformable by themselves and not by reason of the agreement of the Church' (DS.3074) was added to Pastor Aeternus to exclude the opinion of some Gallicans and Conciliarists who regarded subsequent approval by the bishops as necessary

in order to validate a statement's infallibility. Agreement (consensu) is to be understood in its juridical sense, meaning 'official approval' and not in the more general sense of acceptance by the Church as a whole. However, the Church in all its members is implicated in such a definition, not only because it clarifies and enriches their awareness of the truth but also because their reflection upon it in its turn clarifies the significance of the definition itself.

5. Anglicans believe that the Church has been maintained in the truth of the

Gospel and ultimately preserved from error by the Holy Spirit through a continuous process of appeal to Scripture and tradition. '(Authority) is distributed among Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the witness of Saints, and the consensus fidelium, which is the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through his faithful people in the Church'.¹ (See Venice Statement footnote to para.18). Anglicans do not question the reality of this gift by which the Church is maintained in the truth but have associated it rather with the conciliar process than with the pronouncements of universal primates. Thus Anglicans, who have been out of communion with the Roman see for more than four centuries, are not predisposed to acknowledge that the occupant of that see may be invested with such teaching authority as to be able to make pronouncements not subject to higher instance. This is particularly so in the case of the Marian dogmas, the only generally agreed ~~recent~~ instances of infallible decisions. We agree in recognizing the unique vocation and grace of Mary, Mother of the Incarnate Son of God, commemorated in Anglican liturgical observance, and the high honour which should be accorded to her. Anglican difficulties, however, arise from the appropriateness or even the possibility of defining these matters as essential to the faith of believers. It is not easy to show that the Church can make a definition of binding doctrine which for them rests on the ground of fittingness and the wishes of the faithful, but is not supported on evident scripture nor a necessary conclusion from truth which the Church receives as revealed. If the way to communion were otherwise

1. Lambeth Conference 1948.

open this difference of attitude to the papacy which has historical and psychological as well as theological roots, while not entirely disappearing, would be seen in a new and positive perspective. There is nothing alien to Anglican tradition in the idea of a universal primacy as the focus of unity in eucharistic communion of all the local churches.¹

6. The problem of the infallibility of the bishop of Rome is still divisive. This issue is not of major importance within the hierarchy of Christian truths, since it does not concern the mystery of God in himself nor the mystery of the person and work of Christ. Matters which are not primary in this hierarchy are not essential to faith in the same way as are others. Although, if the infallibility of the bishop of Rome is accorded such a place in the hierarchy of Christian truths, and even if it is not accepted, it remains possible to recognise the importance of the truth so expressed. The infallibility of the bishop of Rome is not an end in itself but is held to be part of the way in which the Holy Spirit keeps the Church faithful to the truth. It is regarded as one of the elements of the Church's teaching office, which is only one of the functions of primacy.

7. We believe it to be possible for Anglicans to accept a primacy with an effective teaching office and yet to continue to question the claim to infallibility of the bishop of Rome.² We agree in

¹ (Footnote on Anglican acceptance of Primacy).

² This does not affect our conviction that certain definitions of the Christian faith, rooted in the apostolic tradition as expressed in the Scriptures, are certainly true. (Chillingworth insisted on the need 'to distinguish between being infallible in fundamentals, and being an infallible Guide in fundamentals. That there shall be always a Church infallible in fundamentals, we easily grant; for it comes to no more than this, that there shall be always a Church!') Christian faith includes those formulations, whether or not infallibly defined, which have been given to the Church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for example, faith in one God and three persons in that one God.

recognising that in a universal Church the universal primate when speaking in the name of his fellow bishops for the sake of the koinonia on a crucial issue would be assisted by the Holy Spirit to express the mind of the Church.

(If Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree that the purpose of authority in the Church is to maintain the Church in the truth (Venice 18), even if the two Communion differ in the methods by which they seek to achieve this purpose, we are convinced that this need not preclude a stage which 'requires action to bring about a closer sharing between our two communions in life, worship and mission' (Venice 26).)