

Liverpool
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ARCIC 235/Infallibility Continuation/9

7. A comparison of the preceding paragraphs 5 and 6 shows that there is significant common ground shared by Anglicans and Roman Catholics although the concept of 'infallibility' contains within it an unsolved difficulty. It is not in dispute that the Church can make a decisive judgement in matters of faith (provided it be consonant with Scripture) and so exclude error. This judgement is normally given through synodal decision, but in special circumstances the primate acting in communion with his fellow bishops may articulate the decision even outside a synod. Although reception by the people of God does not confer authority on a definition, the assent of the faithful is the final sign that the Church's authoritative decisions in matters of faith have been truly preserved from error by the Holy Spirit.

8. Anglicans and Roman Catholics agree that the faithfulness of God protects the Church from irrevocable commitment to error in essential matters of faith. In order to formulate its teaching in defence of the proclamation of the Gospel the Church had recourse to ecumenical councils and primatial sees. Only when a genuine balance is struck between conciliar and primatial authority can the Church fully discharge its teaching office. Misunderstandings have arisen from the impression that preservation from fundamental error belongs exclusively to a particular office rather than to the whole Church. Other misunderstandings have derived from the false assumption that such authoritative institutions must have the effect of stifling the freedom of the Spirit to inspire other agencies and individuals.

It is clear, moreover, that the effective fulfilment of their responsibilities by these organs is impaired by divisions among

Christians.

9. There remains a problem concerning the proper subject-matter of authoritative definitions. This was faced at Vatican I, which restricted such definitions to matters of 'faith and morals'. Particular difficulties arise in respect of the Marian definitions and divergent views as to their relation to Scriptural faith.

We recognise that Christian understanding of Mary must in no way be divorced from the doctrines of Christ and the Church nor can it detract from the all-sufficiency of his saving work through which she is herself redeemed. We agree in rejecting any interpretation of the role of Mary that contradicts the affirmation that there is but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. We further agree in recognising in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for the Church.

The issue between us is that of the appropriateness and need for the Church to make statements of essential doctrine in Marian rather than in directly Christological terms. Such questions need further examination in the light of the growing relationship between our Churches.

CONCLUSION

In our conclusion to the Venice Statement we affirmed that we had reached 'a consensus on authority in the Church and, in particular, on the basic principles of primacy', which we believed to be of 'fundamental importance' (para. 24). Nevertheless we showed that four outstanding problems related to this subject required further serious study since, if they remained unresolved, they would appear to constitute insurmountable obstacles to our growing together towards communion. After four years of intensive study we are able to present a fresh appraisal of their significance. This has given a new perspective to our conclusions. The four difficulties were the interpretation of the Petrine texts, the doctrinal understanding of the language of 'divine right', the affirmation of papal infallibility and the nature of the jurisdiction exercised by a universal primate. It seems to us now that our understanding of the Petrine texts, of 'divine right' and of universal jurisdiction indicates that any differences between us in these areas need not impede a realistic coming together of our two communions. On the contrary respect for these differences would give enrichment to our common life. It is only in the matter of infallibility that serious differences remain. Anglicans do not deny that on occasions the Bishop of Rome has spoken so as to protect the Church from error (as have other Church leaders also). They are confident of the assistance of the Spirit in keeping the Church from irrevocable error in essential matters of faith; disagreeing, however, or at least expressing reserve if this protection is claimed to be guaranteed a priori by mere virtue of the functioning of the teaching office of the universal primate. Admittedly the rigorous conditions

prescribed in the Roman Catholic tradition, requiring consonance with Scripture and the sensus fidelium, help to narrow the gap. Moreover, contemporary discussions of conciliarity and primacy in both communions suggest that we are not dealing with positions destined to remain static.

We do not want to minimise this difficulty. But when we consider it not in isolation but in the whole framework of what we agree, we pose the question: is this problem so great as to prevent our two communions from taking further steps in real progress towards unity? We are convinced that some difficulties will be resolved only when a fresh and courageous initiative has been taken.