

APPENDIX B

Comment on the Anglican/Roman Catholic Agreed Statement on
Authority in the Church

Some Points of Agreement

We would like to place on record our agreement with much of the document as a fair statement of facts that are well-known to historians and theologians. For instance, much of paragraph 5 is in full accord with the principles enshrined in our Ordinal. We would agree that 'the episcopate of the ordained ministry' is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, and that 'pastoral authority belongs primarily to the Bishop' - a point which is made clear at the Institution of a Minister to a Cure when the Bishop says to him, 'Receive thy cure, which is both mine and thine', * and delegates some of his authority to him.

We agree that 'The perception of God's will for his Church does not belong only to the ordained ministry but is shared by all its members.' (para. 6). The Church of Ireland has been practising this principle since 1870, when the laity were given an effective voice in Church government at all levels. We seek to discover God's will for our Church after free discussion and debate between bishops, priests and laity in diocesan synods and councils; in our General Synod the laity have equal rights with clergy to speak and vote on all issues, subject only to the requirement that all motions involving doctrinal or liturgical questions must have the support of at least two-thirds of clergy and laity, voting separately.

We would like to see this principle of 'dispersed authority' even more clearly expressed by ARCIC. We would point out that in the Orthodox Churches lay theologians may predominate. The Preface to the Venice Statement states 'The Roman Catholic Church has much to learn from the Anglican synodical tradition of involving the laity in the life and mission of the Church.'

The place of the laity in Church government does not destroy the episcopal character of the Church nor reduce the position of the bishops as teachers and guardians of the faith, e.g. the statement in the Preamble and Declaration to the Constitution of the Church of Ireland which says that 'a General Synod of the Church of Ireland shall have chief legislative power therein, and such administrative power as maybe necessary for the Church, and consistent with its episcopal constitution'.

* - Alternative Form of Institution, authorized by the House of Bishops.

Traditional Anglican View of Authority

In making our response to the ARCIC Agreed Statement on Authority it is inevitable that our comments will reflect the traditional Anglican view of Authority in the Church, as expressed by the 1948 Lambeth Conference. It may help us to clarify the issues if we incorpor-

ate an extract from the report of that Conference:

Authority, as inherited by the Anglican Communion from the undivided Church of the early centuries of the Christian era, is single in that it is derived from a single Divine source, and reflects within itself the richness and historicity of the divine Revelation, the authority of the eternal Father, the incarnate Son, and the life-giving Spirit. It 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. It is thus a dispersed rather than a centralised authority having many elements which combine, interact with, and check each other; these elements together contributing by a process of mutual support, mutual checking, and redressing of errors or exaggerations to the many-sided fullness of the authority which Christ has committed to His Church. Where this authority of Christ is to be found mediated not in one mode but in several we recognise in this multiplicity God's loving provision against the temptations to tyranny and the dangers of unchecked power.

The Venice Statement refers in a footnote to the Lambeth Conferences of 1948 and 1968 and reflects their understanding of authority (Para 18). 'In both our traditions the appeal to Scripture, to the Creeds, to the Fathers and to the definitions of the councils of the early Church is regarded as basic and normative.'

The Agreed Statement is in accord with the Anglican concept of Authority in the primacy which it gives to 'the inspired documents' of the New Testament 'as a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith', through which 'the authority of the Word of God is conveyed' (Para 2), and to which 'the Church refers its teaching and practice'. This seems to accord also with Article 6 of the Thirty-nine Articles which emphasises that 'whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite necessary to salvation'.

The approach of the Venice Statement

When the Venice statement says in Para 2 'Shared commitment and belief create a common mind in determining how the Gospel should be interpreted and obeyed' it is expressing a Christian ideal. ARCIC is deliberately looking forward. This is seen clearly in Para 23 in comment about the possibility of primacy. The Venice statement is talking not about the papacy as it is but as it could be in the united Church of the future. The ideal is that 'the general pattern of the complementary primatial and conciliar aspects of episcopate serving the koinonia of the Churches needs to be realised at a universal level.'

A closely related ideal is expressed in the statement's description of the relationships between local Churches. The local Church is understood as the unity of local communities under one bishop..... and each bishop must ensure that the local community is distinctively Christian and

make it aware of the universal communion of which it is part (para.8). The ecclesiology of ARCIC is an ecclesiology of the local Church and this commands widespread acceptance today across the Churches. Local churches may have considerable diversity but each recognises its own essential features in the others and its true identity with them (para.8). This would seem to be very close to the experience of unity in diversity in the Anglican Communion of Churches.

In para 9 the Statement does not really do justice to the unevenness of the historical process which underlay the definition of Christian doctrines. For instance, it ignores the fact that there was a political element in the summoning of the Council of Nicaea, namely, Constantine's anxiety to achieve peace in the Church. It is more a description of what ought to happen rather than a statement of facts.

The opening passage in para 12 ignores the centuries when the Bishop of Rome did not take a leading part in the settlement of doctrinal questions. For instance, he was not present at the Council of Nicaea, but was represented by two presbyters. The language of the paragraph is often vague and sometimes ambiguous. We know that Roman Catholics would agree that 'The importance of the bishop of Rome among his brother bishops' might be viewed as 'Christ's will for his Church', but few Anglicans would take the same view. Most of this part of the Statement reads like a liberal exposition of how a progressive Roman Catholic might view the papacy, as when it says that 'communion with the bishop of Rome does not imply submission to an authority which would strifle the distinctive features of the local churches.' A reading of The Suenens Dossier or The Supplement to a New Catechism conveys a very different impression of the relationship between the Dutch Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican. The contemporary Roman Catholic theology in the Dutch Catechism received no endorsement in Rome, nor has it received any support from the present Pope.

Para. 17 gives an over-simplified and somewhat misleading version of what actually happened in the growth of the influence of the Roman See. But, even if taken at its face value, it does no more than establish the Roman primacy as a matter of convenience; in no respect essential to the continuing life of the Church. The authority here attributed to Rome was never accepted in Eastern Christendom.

'Translation' and 'restatement'

We can agree with para. 14 that if the Church's proclamation 'is to lead mankind to accept God's saving work in Christ', it must be 'clarified and transmitted in creeds, conciliar definitions, and other statements of belief'. We can also agree that 'It is not enough for the Church simply to repeat the original apostolic words. It has also prophetically to translate them in order that the hearers in their situation may understand and respond to them'. The remainder of para. 15, however, raises some very important issues which require further explication. 'Translation' of 'the apostolic words' into thought-forms and words which make the meaning of the original words more explicit is necessary in every generation. But

then the Statement moves from 'translation' into 'restatement', and goes so far as to say that 'Even when a doctrinal definition is regarded by the Christian community as part of its permanent teaching, this does not exclude subsequent restatement'. The Statement makes its approach clear when it says 'restatement always builds upon, and does not contradict the truth intended by the original definition'.

We welcome the Venice emphasis on the relation of the Scriptures to restatement - 'All such restatement must be consonant with the apostolic witness recorded in the Scriptures; for in this witness the preaching and teaching of ministers, and statements of local and universal councils have to find their ground and consistency'. It seems to us that this principle has not always been evident in the development of some of the dogmas peculiar to the Roman Catholic Church. The statement recognises problems for Anglicans in this area. Para. 24 (c): 'Special difficulties are created by the recent Marian dogmas because Anglicans doubt the appropriateness, or even the possibility, of defining them as essential to the faith of believers'. For Anglicans the Marian dogmas are not restatements but new and different statements. It seems that some objective test such as the Vincentian Canon is required to guard against innovations, even errors in doctrine, for development is only fully catholic when it accords with what has been believed 'always, everywhere, and by all men'.

The authority of Councils

Para 19 presents us with several acute problems. Few will dispute that 'in times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question, the Church can make judgements, consonant with Scripture, which are authoritative'. This is no more than is stated in Article 20 of the Thirty-nine Articles - 'the Church hath authority in controversies of faith'. But such authority is more like that of a judge who may determine what is, or is not, 'consonant with Scripture' and part of 'the faith once for all delivered unto the saints'. (Jude 3).

The next two sentences, however, require further elucidation if serious misunderstandings are to be avoided:

When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous. Through the Holy Spirit the Church commits itself to these judgements recognising that, being faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition, they are by the same Spirit protected from error.

We note that in the course of para. 19 the Venice Statement states clearly that the Holy Spirit guides the Church to accept as protected from error only those judgements of General Councils which 'do not add to the truth' and which are 'consonant with Scripture', 'faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition' and which are 'decisions on fundamental matters of faith' or 'which formulate the central truths of salvation'.

This is entirely consistent with Article of Religion 21 'Of the Authority of General Councils' 'Wherefore things ordained by them (general councils) as necessary to salvation has neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture.'

How is 'ecumenical council' to be defined? The question is important because the number of councils recognised as 'ecumenical' varies considerably. Most Anglicans would restrict that title to Nicaea in 325 AD, Constantinople 1 in 381, Ephesus 431 and Chalcedon 451, though some would include Constantinople 2 553 and Constantinople 3 in 680. The Eastern Orthodox Churches recognise seven, but the Roman Catholic Church regards many more as 'ecumenical', including Vatican I and Vatican II. The footnote recognises this divergence, but does not resolve the problem. A similar lack of preciseness is found in the words in para. 9. 'The decisions of what has traditionally been called an 'ecumenical council' are binding upon the whole Church'. Unless 'the whole Church' is deemed to mean 'the Roman Catholic Church', thereby excluding Anglicans from the Church, and 'traditionally' is similarly restricted to Roman traditions, the words are too vague to be helpful; many councils traditionally known as 'ecumenical' in the Roman Catholic Church are not so acknowledged by Anglicans, who certainly do not regard the decisions of Vatican I as binding upon them.

Councils and 'the faithful'

In the undivided Church of the early centuries 'the faithful' were easily identified. But Vatican II made an important distinction between 'those who, being baptised, are honoured with the name of Christian, though they do not possess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter', and on the other hand, 'the Catholic faithful' identifiable as those who

are fully incorporated into the society of the Church who, possessing the spirit of Christ, accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and through union with her visible structure are joined to Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 11.14,15.)

In the light of this distinction made by Vatican II, it would be natural for Roman Catholics to identify themselves as 'the faithful'. If the 'ecumenicity' of a council and the validity of its decisions depends upon 'the responses of the faithful' and 'the faithful' are identified as only Roman Catholics, the decisions of councils convened by the Pope, when accepted by the faithful members of that Church, become authoritative for them. But the decisions made at Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II were made without the participation of the Eastern Orthodox, Anglican or Reformed Churches; they are not therefore accepted by 'the faithful' in those churches because such councils were not truly 'ecumenical' (representative of the Church throughout the world). The question then arises, since the decisions of the solely Roman Catholic councils (e.g. on Infallibility) have not received the 'response' of all the faithful Christians in Christendom, but only of those in the Roman obedience, how valid can

such decisions be? Hence, when ARCIC declares that 'Whatever further clarification or interpretation may be propounded by the Church, the truth expressed will always be confessed' (para. 19) many will view this as another example of 'idealism' which takes no account of the realities of the situation as clearly expressed in Vatican II.

We note that ARCIC added the important qualifying clause, 'being faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition', which is itself capable of different interpretations. Is it to be understood as an affirmation that conciliar decisions are 'faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition' and protected from error by the Holy Spirit? Or is it intended to be a modification of the previous sentence, implying that only such conciliar decisions as are 'faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition' can be expected to have been protected from error by the Holy Spirit? The Commission adds a further important qualification that 'binding authority' only applies to those decrees 'which formulate the central truths of salvation'. But such phrases as 'faithful to Scripture' can be, and often are, interpreted very subjectively, depending on the theological presuppositions of the user. For instance, Vatican II, by imposing the Roman Catholic Church's interpretation on Luke 22.32 is able to claim that the Roman Pontiff when he 'proclaims by a definite act some doctrine of faith or morals' is making an 'irreformable' definition because he is acting 'with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, an assistance promised to him in blessed Peter' (Constitution on the Church. 111.25). Others, following generally accepted principles of exegesis, are equally certain that our Lord's words, 'I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted, strengthen (GK. *sterizein*) thy brethren', did not confer upon Peter any promise of infallibility, still less upon those who claim to be his successors. The suggestion that 'many Roman Catholic scholars do not now feel it necessary to stand by former exegesis of these texts in every respect' (para. 24a), does not resolve the problem, for Vatican II reaffirmed the traditional exegesis (Const. on Church, 111.22, 25) and declared that the Pope's 'primatial authority over all, whether pastors or faithful, remains in its integrity.'

Likewise 'consistent with Tradition' is also capable of various interpretations. Bishop R. P. C. Hanson has shown that 'the word tradition, even if it is purely theological or ecclesiastical usage, is employed today in a wide variety of meanings'. It can mean the Bible alone, the whole teaching of the Church, historical information independent of Scripture, the official doctrine of the Church as it has been taught and developed from the earliest times, the creeds, etc. He points out that it can be used 'to supplement the New Testament authoritatively, as when it is claimed that this dogma or that one is founded on tradition in addition to or instead of Scripture'. (Tradition in the Early Church, 1962, p.7).

As we draw our comments towards a conclusion it would seem appropriate to remind ourselves and the members of ARCIC of the comprehensiveness of Our Lord's prayer for the Church in John 17. Archbishop Ramsey expressed his understanding of Christ's will in an address to the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1961:-

'Our Great High Priest is interceding. And for what does he

pray? That his disciples may be one, that they may be sanctified, that they may be sanctified in truth. Unity, holiness, truth; as the prayer is indivisible, so the fulfilment is indivisible too. It is useless to think that we can look for unity in Christ's name unless we are looking no less for holiness in His obedience and for the realisation of the truth which He has revealed A movement which concentrates on unity as an isolated concept can mislead the world and mislead us, as indeed would a movement which had the exclusive label of holiness or the exclusive label of truth.' (Canterbury Essays and Addresses, p. 55f.)

Therefore we express our gratitude to the theologians who prepared the Agreed Statement. In many ways it is an admirable Statement. We praise the members of the Commission for trying to avoid old polemics and the emotional language associated with them. The criticisms we make in our response indicate the difficulty of the task to which they have put their hand. The measure of the progress which they have made is a ground for hope and joy, for the Agreed Statement would seem to provide a sufficient theological basis for further official dialogue.