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ARCIC 246/Bristol Elucidation

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AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH: AN ELUCIDATION

1. Comments and Criticisms

After the publication of the Venice Statement on Authority in the Church the Commission received comments and criticisms. Some of the questions raised, such as the request for a clarification of the relation between infallibility and indefectibility, find an answer in the second Statement on Authority. Another question, concerning our understanding of koinonia, is answered in the Introduction, where we show how the concept underlies all our Statements.

Behind many reactions to the Venice Statement is a degree of uneasiness as to whether insufficient attention is paid to the primary authority of Scripture, with the result that certain historical developments are given an authority comparable to that of Scripture.

Serious questions have also been asked about councils and reception and some commentators have claimed that what the Statement says about the protection of an ecumenical council from error is in conflict with Article XXI of the Anglican Thirty Nine Articles of Religion.

It has been generally suggested that the treatment of the place and authority of the laity in the Church is inadequate. There have also been requests for a clarification of the nature of Christian authority and of jurisdiction.

Some questions have been asked about the status of regional primacies - for example, the patriarchal office as exercised in the Eastern Churches.

Finally, a recurring question has been whether the Commission

is suggesting that a universal primacy is a theological necessity simply because one has existed or been claimed.

In what follows the Commission attempts to address itself to these problems and to elucidate the Venice Statement as it bears on each of them. In seeking to answer the criticisms that have been received we have sometimes thought it necessary to go further and to elucidate the basic issues that underlie them. In all that we say we take for granted two fundamental principles - that Christian faith depends on divine revelation and that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in the understanding and transmission of revealed truth.

The Place of Scripture

Our documents have been criticised for failing to give an adequate account of the primary authority of Scripture in the Church, thereby making it possible for us to treat certain historical developments as possessing an authority comparable to that of Scripture itself. Our description of 'the inspired documents... as a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith' (Venice, para. 2) has been felt to be an inadequate statement of the truth.

The basis of our approach to Scripture is the affirmation that Christ is God's final word to man - his eternal Word made flesh. He is the culmination of the diverse ways in which God has spoken since the beginning (Hebrews 1:1-3). In him God's saving and revealing purpose is fully and definitively realised.

Moses and the prophets received and spoke the word of God in the Spirit. By the power of the same Spirit the Word of God became flesh and accomplished his ministry. At Pentecost the same Spirit was given to the disciples to enable them to recall and interpret what Jesus did and taught, and so to proclaim the Gospel in truth and power.

The person and work of Jesus Christ, preached by the apostles and set forth and interpreted in the New Testament writings, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are the primary norm for Christian faith and life. Jesus, as the Word of God, sums up in himself the whole of God's self-disclosure. The Church's essential task, therefore, in the exercise of its teaching office, is to unfold the full extent and implications of the mystery of Christ, under the guidance of the Spirit of the risen Lord.

No endeavour of the Church to express the truth can add to the revelation already given. Moreover, since the Scriptures are the uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation, the Church's expression of that revelation must be tested by its consonance with Scripture. This does not mean simply repeating the words of Scripture, but also both delving into their deeper significance and unravelling their implications for Christian belief and practice. It is impossible to do this without resorting to current language and thought. Consequently the teaching of the Church will often be expressed in words that are different from the original text of Scripture without being alien to its meaning. For instance in early ecumenical councils the Church spoke about 'two natures' in order to expound the mystery of Christ. What was understood by the word 'nature' at this time was believed to express the content of Christian faith concerning Christ, even though the actual word is never so used in the apostolic writings. This combination of permanence in the revealed truth and continuous exploration of its meaning is what is meant by Christian tradition. Some of the results of this reflection, which bear upon essential matters of faith, have come to be recognised as the authentic expression of Christian doctrine and therefore part of the depositum fidei.

Tradition has been viewed in two different ways. The first approach is primarily concerned never to go beyond the bounds of Scripture. Under the guidance of the Spirit undiscovered riches and truths are sought in the Scriptures in order to illuminate the faith according to the needs of each generation. This is not slavery to the text of Scripture. It is an unfolding of the riches of the original revelation. The second approach is very

different, without necessarily contradicting the former. In the conviction that the Holy Spirit is seeking to guide the Church into the fulness of truth, it draws upon everything in human experience and thought which will give to the content of the revelation its fullest expression and widest application. It is primarily concerned with the growth of the seed of God's word from age to age. This does not imply any denial of the uniqueness of the revelation. Because these two attitudes contain differing exphases, conflict may arise, even though in both cases the Church is seeking the fulness of revelation. The seal upon the truthfulness of the conclusions that result from this search will be the reception by the whole Church, since neither approach is immune from the possibility of error.

3. Councils and Reception

The Commission has been said to contradict Article XXI of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion in its affirmation that the decisions of what have traditionally been called ecumenical councils 'exclude what is erroneous'.

Whatever status may be accorded to the Thirty Nine Articles in various parts of the Anglican Communion, the Commission is very far from saying that general councils cannot err and is well aware that they 'sometimes have rrrred'. For example there have been councils which have claimed the title 'ecumenical' but have not been so received by the universal Church (Ariminum and Seleucia of 359 AD). It is impossible to hold that everything decreed even at a duly-constituted general council is free of error. Article XXI in fact affirms that general councils have authority only when their judgements 'may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture'. According to the argument of the

Venice Statment also only those judgements of general councils are guaranteed to 'exclude what is erroneous' or are 'protected from error' which have as their content 'fundamental matters of faith', which 'formulate the central truths of salvation' and which are 'faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition'. 'They do not add to the truth but, although not exhaustive, they clarify the Church's understanding of it' (para. 19).

The Commission has also been asked to say whether reception by the whole people of God is part of the process which gives authority to the decisions of ecumenical councils.

By 'reception' we mean the fact that the people of God acknowledge a decision or statement of faith because they recognise in it their own belief. They accept it because they discern a harmony between what is proposed to them and the sensus fidelium of the whole Church. As an example, the fathers of the Council of Chalcedon received the Letter of Pope Leo I when they recognised in it the faith of the apostles. Reception does not create truth nor legitimise the decision: it sets the seal on what the legitimate episcopo has pronounced for the good of the Church. It is the final indication that the necessary conditions for an ecumenical council have been met. In this acceptance the whole Church is involved in a continuous process of discernment and response (cf para.6).

The Commission therefore avoids two extreme positions. On the one hand it rejects the view that a definition has no authority until it is accepted by the whole Church and derives its authority solely from that acceptance. Equally, the Commission denies that a council is so self-sufficient that it owes nothing to reception.

4. The Place of the Laity

The Commission has been accused of an over-emphasis upon the ordained ministry to the neglect of the laity.

In guarding and developing communion, every member has a part to play. Baptism gives everyone in the Church the right, and consequently the ability, to carry out his particular function in the body. The recognition of this fundamental right is of great importance. In different ways, even if sometimes hesitantly, our two churches have sought to integrate in decision making those who are not ordained. But some critics maintain that the problem lies in the restriction of this function to mere consultation.

The reason why the Venice Statement spoke at length about the structure of ministerial authority was that this was the area where most difficulties appeared to exist. There was no de-valuing of the proper and active role of the laity. For instance, we said that the Holy Spirit gives to some individuals and communities special gifts for the benefit of the Church (para.5), that all the members of the Church share in the discovery of God's will (para.6), that the sensus fidelium is a vital element in the comprehension of God's truth (para.18), and that all bear witness to God's compassion for mankind and his concern for justice in the world (Canterbury 7).

5. Hierarchical Authority

We have been asked to clarify the meaning of what some of our critics call 'hierarchical authority' - an expression we avoided. Here we are dealing with a form of authority which is inherent in the visible structure of the Church. By this we mean the authority attached to those who exercise episcopate in the Church. The Holy Spirit gives to each person power to fulfil his particular function within the body of Christ. Accordingly, those exercising episcopate receive the grace appropriate to their calling; and those over whom it is exercised must recognize and accept their God-given authority.

Both Anglicans and Roman Catholics, however, have criticized the emphasis we placed on a bishop's authority in certain circumstances to require compliance.

The specific oversight of the ordained ministry is exercised and acknowledged when a minister preaches the Gospel, presides at the Eucharist and seeks as pastor to lead the community truly to discern God's Word and its relevance to their lives. When this responsibility laid upon a bishop (or other ordained minister under the direction of a bishop) requires him to declare a person to be in error in respect of doctrine or conduct, even to the point of excluding him from eucharistic communion, he is acting for the sake of the integrity of the community's faith and life. Both our communions have always recognized this need for disciplinary action on exceptional occasions as part of the authority given by Christ to his ministers, however difficult it may be in practice to take such action. This is what we meant by saying that the bishop 'can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity in its daily life' (para.5). At the same time the authority of the ordained minister is not held in isolation, but is shared with other ministers and the rest of the community. All the ministers, whatever their role in the body of Christ, are involved in responsibility for preserving the integrity of the community.

6. Jurisdiction

Critics have asked for clarification on two matters. First, what do we mean by jurisdiction? We understand jurisdiction as the power necessary for the effective fulfilment of an office. Its exercise and limits are determined by what that office involves.

In both our communions we find dioceses comprising different parishes and groups of dioceses at the provincial, national or international level. All of these are under the oversight of a special episcopo exercised by ministers with a shared responsibility for the overall care of the Church. Every form of jurisdiction given to those exercising such an episcopo is to serve and strengthen both the koinonia in the community and that between different Christian communities.

Secondly it has been questioned whether we imply that jurisdiction attached to different levels of episcopo - even within the same order of ministry - is always to be exercised in an identical way. Critics give

the example of the relation and possible conflict between metropolitans and local bishops. We believe that the problem is not basically that of jurisdiction but of the complementarity and harmonious working of these differing forms of episcopate in the one body of Christ. Jurisdiction, being the power necessary for the fulfilment of an office, varies according to the specific functions of each form of episcopate. That is why the use of this juridical vocabulary does not mean that we attribute to all those exercising episcopate at different levels exactly the same power. Thus for example the jurisdiction of a metropolitan in his province is not a heightened form of the power proper to a local bishop as if the latter were no more than an auxiliary: nor is it the exercise on a broader field of precisely the same power as a local bishop possesses in his diocese: it is determined by the specific functions which he is required to discharge in relation to his fellow-bishops.

7. Regional Primacy

Concern has been voiced that the Commission's treatment of regional primacy is inadequate. In particular reference has been made to the Orthodox tradition of autocephalous patriarchates.

The Commission did not ignore this tradition in its treatment of the origins of primacy (cf. III esp. para 10). It avoids specific terms such as 'Metropolitan' and 'Patriarch' solely on the grounds of the complex historical problems associated with the origin and function of these offices. In speaking of bishops in their regions, the Commission intends to point to the reality behind the historical terms used for this form of episcopal co-responsibility in both east and west. It also points to the contemporary development and importance of new forms of regional primacy in both our traditions, e.g. the elective presidencies of Roman Catholic episcopal conferences and certain elective primacies in the Anglican Communion.

Primacy and History

It has been alleged that the Commission commends the primacy of the Roman See solely on the basis of history. But the Commission's argument is more than historical (cf. para. 23).

The unity in truth of the Christian community demands visible expression. We agree that such visible expression, therefore, is the will of God and that the maintenance of visible unity requires episcopate. This is a doctrinal argument about the nature of Church order. But the way episcopate is realised concretely in ecclesial life (the balance fluctuating between conciliarity and primacy) will depend upon contingent historical factors and upon development under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Though it is possible to conceive a universal primacy located elsewhere than in the city of Rome, the original witness of Peter and Paul and the continuing exercise of a universal episcopate by the See of Rome present a unique presumption in its favour. Therefore, while to locate a universal primacy in the See of Rome is an affirmation at a different level from the assertion of the necessity for a universal primacy, it cannot be dissociated from the providential action of the Holy Spirit.

The design of God through the Holy Spirit has, we believe, been to preserve at once the fruitful diversity within the koinonia of local churches and the unity in essentials which must mark the universal koinonia. The history of our separation has underlined and continues to underline the necessity for this proper theological balance, which has often been distorted or destroyed by human failings or other historical factors (cf. para. 22).

The Commission does not therefore say that what has evolved historically or what is currently practised by the Roman See is necessarily normative: only that visible unity requires the realisation of a 'general' pattern of the complementary primatial and conciliar aspects of episcopate in the service of the universal 'koinonia of the Churches'. Indeed much Anglican objection has

been directed against the manner of the exercise and particular claims of the Roman primacy rather than against universal primacy as such.

Anglicanism has never rejected the principle and practice of primacy. New reflection upon it has been stimulated by the evolving role of the Archbishop of Canterbury within the Anglican Communion. The development of this form of primacy arose precisely from the need for a service of unity in the faith in an expanding communion of churches. It finds expression in successive Lambeth Conferences, which originated with the request for guidance from two provinces in a matter of faith. This illustrates a particular relationship between conciliarity and primacy in the Anglican Communion.

The Commission has already pointed to the possibilities of mutual benefit and reform which should arise from a shared recognition of one universal primacy which does not inhibit conciliarity - a 'prospect (which) should be met with faith, not fear' (Co-Chairmen's Preface). Anglicans sometimes fear the prospect of over-centralization, Roman Catholics the prospect of doctrinal incoherence. Faith, banishing fear, might see simply the prospect of the right balance between a primacy serving the unity and a conciliarity maintaining the just diversity of the koinonia of all the churches.