

Infallibility

22. It is Christ himself, the Way, the Truth and the Life, who entrusts the Gospel to us and gives to his Church teaching authority which claims our obedience. The Church as a whole indwelt by the Spirit according to Christ's promise and looking to the testimony of the prophets, saints and martyrs of every generation, is witness, teacher and guardian of the truth (cf. Venice 18a). The Church is confident that the Holy Spirit will effectually enable it to fulfil its mission so that it will neither lose its essential character nor fail to reach its goal.¹ We are agreed that doctrinal decisions made by legitimate authority must be consonant with the community's faith as grounded in scripture and interpreted by the mind of the Church, and that no teaching authority can add new revelation to the original apostolic faith (cf. Venice 2 and 18). We must then ask whether there is a special ministerial gift of discerning the truth and of teaching bestowed on one man to enable him to speak authoritatively at crucial times in the name of the Church in order to preserve the people of God in the truth.

23. Preservation from fundamental error requires that at certain moments the Church can in a matter of essential truth make a decisive judgement which becomes part of its permanent witness.² Such a judgement makes it clear what the truth is, and strengthens the Church's confidence in proclaiming the Gospel. Obvious examples of such judgements are occasions when general councils define the faith. These judgements, by

¹ This is the meaning of indefectibility, a term which does not speak of the Church's lack of defects but confesses that, despite all its many wickednesses and failures, Christ is faithful to his promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

² That this is in line with Anglican theology is clear from Article XX: 'The Church hath..authority in controversies of faith?'

virtue of their foundation in revelation and their appropriateness to the need of the time, express a renewed unity in the truth to which they summon the whole Church.

24. The Church in all its members is involved in such a definition: it clarifies and enriches their grasp of the truth and their active reflection upon it in its turn clarifies the significance of the definition itself. However, although it is not through reception by the people of God that a definition first acquires authority, the assent of the faithful shows that the Church's authoritative decision in a matter of faith has been truly preserved from error by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who maintains the Church in the truth will bring its members to receive it as true and to assimilate it if what has been declared genuinely expounds the revelation.

25. The Church exercises teaching authority through various instruments and agencies at various levels (cf. Venice 9 and 18-22). When matters of faith are at stake decisions may be made by the Church in universal councils; we are agreed that these are authoritative (cf. Venice 19). We have also recognised the need in a united Church for a universal primate, who, presiding over the koinonia can speak with authority in the name of the Church (cf. Venice 23). Through both these agencies the Church can make a decisive judgement in matters of faith (provided it be consonant with Scripture) and so exclude error.

26. The purpose of this service cannot be to add to the content of revelation, but to recall and emphasize some important truth; to expound the faith more lucidly; to expose error; to draw out implications not sufficiently recognised; and to

show how Christian truth applies to contemporary issues. These statements would be intended to elucidate, define or articulate matters of faith which the community believes at least implicitly. The welfare of the koinonia does not require that all the statements of those who speak authoritatively on behalf of the Church should be considered permanent expressions of the truth. But situations may occur where serious divisions of opinion on crucial issues of pastoral urgency call for a more permanent statement. Either kind of statement would be intended as an expression of the mind of the Church, understood not only in the context of its time and place but also in the light of the Church's whole experience and tradition. All such judgements are provoked by specific historical situations and are always made in terms of the understanding and framework of their age. (cf. Venice 15). But in the continuing life of the Church, they retain a lasting significance if they are safeguarding the substance of the faith. The Church's teaching authority is a service to which the faithful look for guidance especially in times of uncertainty; but the assurance of the truthfulness of its teaching rests ultimately rather upon its fidelity to the Gospel than upon the character or office of the person by whom it is expressed. [The Church's teaching is proclaimed because it is recognised to be true: it is not acknowledged to be true simply because it has been proclaimed.] The value of such authoritative proclamation lies in the guidance that it gives to the faithful. However, neither general councils nor universal primates are preserved from error in everything they say, even when they speak authoritatively (cf. Elucidations).

27. The Church's judgement is normally given through synodal

decision, but at times the primate acting in communion with his fellow bishops may articulate the decision even outside a synod. Preservation from fundamental error is a gift which belongs to the whole Church but may be exercised by a spokesman authorised to speak on its behalf. The exercise of authority in the Church need not and must not have the effect of stifling the freedom of the Spirit to inspire other agencies and individuals. On the contrary, there have been times in the history of the Church when both councils and universal primates have protected legitimate positions which have been under attack. Divisions between Christians reduce the effectiveness with which those who hold authority in the Church can speak to those outside their own communion. Mutual misunderstandings have been aggravated by more than four centuries of separation.

28. The service of preserving the Church from error has been performed by the bishop of Rome as universal primate both within and outside this process. The judgement of Leo I, for example, in his letter received by the Council of Chalcedon helped to maintain a balanced view of the two natures in Christ. This does not mean that other bishops are restricted to a merely consultative role, nor that every statement of the bishop of Rome instantly solves the immediate problem or decides the matter at issue for ever. Reception of a judgement of the bishop of Rome as an authoritative discernment of the truth depends upon the fulfilment of conditions, some of which were laid down by the First Vatican Council. He must speak explicitly as the focus of the koinonia; without being under duress from external pressures; having sought to discover the mind of his fellow bishops and of the Church as a whole; and with a clear intention to issue a

binding decision upon a matter of faith or morals. When it is plain that these conditions have been fulfilled, Roman Catholics are sure that the judgement is preserved from error and the proposition true. Anglicans however will reserve their judgement until the matter has been confirmed by further verification in the light of Scripture and tradition.

29. The Anglican position is demonstrated by their reaction to the Marian definitions, which are the only two examples in recent times of such dogmas promulgated by the universal primate. Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree in much of the truth that these two dogmas are designed to affirm.

We agree in recognising the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (Theotokos), in observing her festivals, and in according her honour in the communion of saints. We are confident that she was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer and that her glory in heaven is proportionate to the honour God gave her on earth. 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 interpretations 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 all Christians; we accept that it is possible to regard her as a prophetic figure of the Church of God before as well as