

In a letter to the Revd. Colin Davey, dated 28th May 1973,
Fr. Lindars wrote:

"My function at the Marriage Commission was to make the point that Jesus did not lay down a special form of the institution of marriage to be observed by Christians, but was concerned to make men face themselves within the frame of the existing Jewish institutions. I feel that the assumptions of the present statement need an equally radical criticism, not because I do not value the apostolic succession (my own ordination in Durham Cathedral was unforgettable from this point of view), but because the statement fails to recognise that the whole notion of apostolic succession has to be subjected to the judgment of the gospel before its real value can be appreciated."

1. Christ the Apostle

This part of the statement seems to me to be unexceptionable on the whole. But I would draw attention to the fact that the notion of succession is wholly absent from the position implied by the gospels. The Twelve are chosen for a specific task, a mission on behalf of Jesus, whereby the teaching he has been giving in Galilee is brought rapidly to the towns and villages of Judea before he goes to Jerusalem to proclaim his message at the centre of Judaism. It is implied that in the coming Kingdom they will be rewarded for their services by holding positions of authority (Luke 22. 28-30), an important reference strangely omitted in the statement). But the perspective does not go beyond the immediate future, and nothing is said of successors to the Apostles. The same is true of the post-resurrection commissioning. The task assigned to the Apostles is obviously such as to require the help of others, but the method of appointing them is not explained, nor is there any indication how their personal authority is to be continued when they are no longer able to exercise it themselves. Consequently the aspect of succession has to be deduced from what actually did happen as a matter of history, in so far as it is possible to discover this.

2 (a) The Apostles

The statement duly gives such evidence as there is that apostolic authority was passed on by a commissioning with the laying on of hands. But it fails to make clear that there is no certain distinction between commissioning for a specific task and commissioning for a permanent position of authority. Thus Acts 13.1-3 tells how a group of 'prophets and teachers', including Barnabas and Saul (Paul), were commissioned with imposition of hands for the mission to Cyprus and Asia Minor. But Paul himself does not rely on this for his own claim to apostolic authority. He traces it to his own vision of the risen Christ, and claims that this puts him on a level with the Apostles who received their commission from the risen Christ. This raises the question whether their commissioning, involving an appearance of the risen Lord, was, as a matter of experience, different from Paul's visionary experience. Paul himself implies that it was not (1 Cor. 15.5-8). On the other hand commissioning for a position of authority does not confer the title or status of Apostle. This is presumably because it is a pastoral charge rather than a mission, for which the notion of sending implicit in the title Apostle is central.

The succession from Apostle to pastor (episcopos) comes about because the new churches were planted as a result of mission. The apostolic men who lead the mission naturally make arrangements for adequate supervision of the flock when they depart. They commission leaders for pastoral care. Naturally, once a new church is established, it may undertake a mission, and so commission missionaries (who could surely be called apostles) from its own number (Antioch in Acts 13 is a case in point). But the fourfold description of apostleship given in the statement does not necessarily apply to the pastoral overseers.

At a later stage, but already in Ephesians and the Apocalypse, symbolic importance is attached to the Twelve, and the title Apostle begins to be reserved for them alone, with the exception of Paul. This coincides with the prestige of the churches claiming apostolic foundation, which became an important factor in the struggle with heresy in the second century.

2 (b) Apostolic Succession

Seeing that the Apostles appointed leaders in the church, apostolic succession can be regarded as a fact of history, no doubt divinely guided. But it is not to be supposed that this exhausts the evidence for ministry in the early church. Paul mentions various functionaries. Among these prophets were specially important, so much so that Eph. 2.20 brackets them with the Apostles themselves (modern scholarship is almost unanimous that the reference is to Christian prophets, not to the Old Testament prophets). But there is no indication that there was an ordination to an office of prophet. 1 Tim. 4.14 and 2 Tim. 1.6 may be harmonised with the aid of 1 Tim. 1.18: the Christian prophets have indicated the choice of Timothy for the position of authority, and this has been conferred by Paul himself accompanied by the elders, who all take part in the imposition of hands. It is not clear whether the presbyters have themselves been ordained with imposition of hands, or whether Timothy's ordination would be sufficient without Paul. In other words, it is not succession as such that is important but the due authorisation by the competent body. A presbyterian theory of church order is consistent with the New Testament evidence.

Again it seems that the tendency to throw the emphasis on the element of tactual succession is due to the struggle with heresy and the importance of the apostolic sees. From this point of view succession has a limiting role, to exclude ministers and congregations which are regarded as heretical. Only tactual succession guarantees genuine exousia to perform the functions of the sacred ministry. The Greek word combines the notion of auctoritas and potestas, and the emphasis subtly shifts from the former to the latter. It is inevitable that on this basis reconciliation between separated groups is only possible by the submission of one to the other, which claims to have the monopoly of truth.

Today this will not do. When separated churches desire to unite, it is because they recognise that there is sufficient common ground between them though they are probably aware of deficiencies on both sides. Each participating church has its duly authorised ministry, and this is apostolic in so far as the church in which it is exercised holds the apostolic faith, and has the succession in so far as the ongoing life of the church is itself the basic factor for continuity. Reconciliation

of churches should automatically involve reconciliation of ministries in the very same act. And this, to be reconciliation at all, has to be a matter of complete mutual acceptance - the acceptance of one body by the other as a whole, including each other's ministries, which at once become completely interchangeable. There can be no such thing as genuine mutual acceptance if elaborate technical adjustments have to be made in advance in order to achieve parity of ministries, or if any distinction is maintained between the ministries after the union.

The fact that we can hardly visualise such a mutual acceptance at all arises from the ingrained sense of the limiting role of apostolic succession. As a device to keep people out, it inevitably militates against any attempt to let people in.

Apostolic succession as a negative, limiting thing must be regarded as a distortion of the intentions of Christ and the Apostles. As a positive thing it is a fact of history, along with other equally important facts (use of the Bible, maintenance of the faith, dispensing of the sacraments of the gospel, care of the flock) which attest the continuity of the church, and we can be grateful for it. But we should also be grateful for that tunnel period in the early history of the church, in which it disappears from view. That is a salutary reminder not to raise a valuable factor of the church's history into a sine qua non of its existence. For historically speaking the apostolic succession in the literal sense can never be more than probable.

The statement leaves an impression of smugness, because it is not willing to be self-critical at this crucial point. Both Anglicans and Roman Catholics are proud of the succession, and so do not see that the ecclesial case that is built on it is really the rationalisation of tradition. The statement still requires that Roman Catholics should accept Anglican orders on traditional grounds (if they are ever to accept them at all). It could almost have been written in the 1890s. It marks no advance towards the flexibility and severely self-critical approach which is needed for tackling the problem of the ministry today.