

OBSERVATIONS OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH
ON THE ARCIC VENICE STATEMENT "AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH" (1976)

As a study document this Statement represents an impressive first step in the ARCIC dialogue on authority in the church. At this point, however, the document cannot yet be said to qualify as a Statement of substantial agreement on faith doctrine. The omission of essential elements of Catholic teaching and the ambiguity of some parts of the text make it difficult to accept the claim with which the members of ARCIC refer to the first 23 paragraphs of this document: "What we have written here amounts to a consensus on authority in the Church and, in particular, on the basic principle of primacy" (par. 24).

It is unfortunate that the use of the inductive-historical method in this document has not been strengthened with the basic principles which flow from affirmations already made in the Canterbury Statement on Ministry. The Venice Statement's lack of pertinent reference to the previous doctrine of the Canterbury Statement creates the impression that the two documents are parallel rather than consecutive in origin. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would like to draw attention to the way in which the Venice Statement has failed to utilize the significant gains of the Canterbury Statement in addressing the question of authority.

1. The document on Ministry (par. 4) emphasizes that "all Christian apostolate originates in the sending of the Son by the Father" and stresses the "fundamental significance" of the ministry of the Apostles, chosen by Christ, as constitutive of the mission of the Church for all time. The Authority document, on the other hand, is silent about this important aspect of the origin of ministry and authority in the Church.

Though the Venice Statement speaks of the Lordship of Christ as the source of all authority in the Church (par.1) and though it affirms that "by the action of the Holy Spirit the authority of the Lord is active in the Church" (par. 3), nonetheless paragraphs 2-5 and 7 so emphasize the activity of the Spirit that the Christological principle of authority in the Church seems to be forgotten.¹

2. The Ministry Statement not only affirms the special powers of the Church's ordained ministers but also attributes this power to sacramental ordination (par. 8,9,11,14,16). Canterbury's paragraph 9, for example, situates the "oversight" (episkopē) of bishops and the Eucharistic ministry of presbyters - the latter called in par. 13 "central in the church's life" and illustrative of the "essential nature of the Christian ministry"- within the context of "ordained ministry". It seems regrettable, therefore, that the Venice Statement did not articulate its development of the notion of authority in the Church more coherently with these affirmations, thus delineating that the authority given by Christ to the Apostles is given to the Church's ministry through sacramental ordination.

3. The Ministry Statement makes clear that "the ministry of ordained ministers is not an extension of the common Christian priesthood but belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit" (par. 13). Though one may say that this principle is applied to the authority of the Bishops (in par. 5 of the Venice Statement), nevertheless this distinction is blurred by the ambiguous use of the notion of authority; for example, the fundamental assertion of paragraph 5 --"This service of the Church (ministerial authority), officially entrusted only to ordained ministers, is intrinsic to the church's structure according to the mandate given by Christ and recognized by the community"--is immediately attenuated by the addition, "This is yet another form of authority". This distinction is further blurred by the ambiguities in paragraphs 6,7, and 16 which affirm that even doctrinal decisions of episcopal authority are conditioned by acceptance on the part of the faithful².

4. Treating of the teaching apostolate of the ordained ministry. the Canterbury Statement (par. 10) gives wide scope to the contents of doctrinal exposition. The Venice Statement, on the other hand does not take this scope into account when it limits the authority of ecumenical councils to doctrinal decisions on "fundamental matters of faith" and "the central truths of salvation" (par. 19). Understood in a narrow sense, such a limitation would not accord with Catholic teaching on the "hierarchy of truths or dogmas" and on the extent of the Church's teaching authority not only to the deposit of faith but also to all those truths without which the deposit cannot be safeguarded and rightly expressed.³

These discordances between the Canterbury and Venice Statements attenuate the assertion that the Venice Statement amounts to a "consensus on authority in the Church" (par. 24). From the Catholic point of view, therefore, this document seems to omit the basic principles of episcopal authority for which the Commission had already prepared the way in its Statement on Ministry.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith finds equal difficulty in accepting the Venice Statement as a "consensus... on the basic principles of primacy" (par. 24). It is true that the inductive-historical method which ARCIC has followed in this document leads to a conclusion which will gratify the ordinary Catholic reader: "The only See which makes any claim to universal primacy and which has exercised and still exercises such episcopē is the see of Rome, the city where Peter and Paul died. It seems appropriate that in any future union a universal primacy such as has been described should be held by that see" (par. 23)

Unfortunately, however, when this affirmation is read in the context of what precedes and in the light of the difficulties which still remain (par. 24), it does not meet the requirements of Catholic faith doctrine. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith will specify the aspects of the document which, from the Catholic point of view, are open to criticism.

1. In accord with its historical reconstruction of successive phenomena in church life, the Venice Statement (pars. 10-12) seems to speak of the universal Roman primacy as a superlative emergent of the providential process whereby local primacies became part of church organization.⁴ This does not seem justified historically, since the primacy of the church of Rome antedated the local primacy of the prominent sees (referred to in par. 10). More important than this, the application of the Petrine texts to the Bishop of Rome (from the mid-third century onwards) manifests the faith of the Church that the Roman primacy was not merely a providential happening, but was an actualization of the constitutive intention of Christ himself. This truth of Catholic teaching does not receive adequate expression in the first two sentences of paragraph 12, which prescind from affirming that, in his dealings with Peter, Christ provided for a permanent authority role in his church.⁵

2 . Because the Venice document views the Roman primacy merely "within the context of the historical development" of the local primacies (par. 12), it does not take into account the unique specificity of the primatial office of the Bishop of Rome. Thus paragraph 12 of the Venice Statement does not adequately express the nature and function of the Roman primacy which throughout history has exercised a role not only of surveillance and support but also of universal jurisdiction and authoritative teaching. This unique character of the primacy of the See of Rome was defined by Vatican Council I.⁶

3 In the light of these basic principles of Catholic teaching the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith finds it difficult to accept the manner in which the Venice Statement treats the Catholic position that papal primacy is intrinsic to the structure of the church catholic. In paragraph 24b the document affirms, "The First Vatican Council of 1870 uses the language of 'divine right' of the successors of Peter. This language has no clear interpretation in modern Catholic theology". This statement does not accord with fact since all Catholic theologians must accept the Council's own definition of "divine right" as meaning "ex ipsius Christi Domini institutione".⁷

For a similar reason the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also finds the language of paragraph 24a somewhat ambiguous. The document says of the Petrine texts (Matt. 16:18-19; Luke 22: 31-32; John 21: 15-17) "Many Roman Catholic scholars do not now feel it necessary to stand by former exegesis of these texts in every respect". The immediate context of this sentence (par. 24a) and the fact that the document nowhere affirms the Petrine origin of the Roman primacy could lead to misunderstanding. Whatever may be the exegesis offered by Catholic scholars they must hold the doctrine defined by Vatican I, Sess IV, c.2 that "by the institution of Christ Himself Peter does have perpetual successors in the primacy over the universal church and the Roman Pontiff is the successor of Peter in this same primacy."⁸ For, as we are reminded in the "Constitution on Divine Revelation" of Vatican Council II, in order to ascertain the genuine meaning of scriptural texts "the living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between the elements of the faith".⁹ Hence the Catholic Church realizes that "it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed".¹⁰

Though the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith esteems the

advances and convergences which the Venice Statement manifests, it cannot accept the idea that the document "amounts to a consensus on authority in the Church and, in particular, on the basic principles of primacy" (par.24). The Venice Statement must be considered rather as the first step in a dialogue which calls for more research and reflection.

NOTES

1. The text from Ephesians 4: 11,12 cited in paragraph 4 clearly attributes the bestowal of these gifts to Christ risen to heaven.

2. Despite the explanatory exegesis provided by two members of ARCIC (E.J.Yarnold and Henry Chadwick, Truth and Authority, London : CTS and SPCK, 1977, pp 20-21) the paragraphs as written seem to attribute to the faithful an authority coequal even with the authority of an ecumenical council. Cf., on the other hand, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Mysterium Ecclesiae", n.2, on the question of the "consensus fidelium".

3. cf. "Mysterium Ecclesiae", nos. 4 and 3, with reference to the pertinent decrees of Vatican Council II.

4. This seems to be the obvious sense of the first sentence of paragraph 12. If the sense indicated by Edward Yarnold, S.J., in his article "Primacy and Conciliarity", The Month (March, 1977), p. 79, footnote 4, expresses the mind of ARCIC, this intention would certainly deserve clarification.

5. cf. DS 2058

6. cf. DS 3064 It is noteworthy that the content of this definition was substantially expressed in the Acts of Lateran Council IV (cf, DS 807, 811), at which six Archbishops and twenty six Bishops of the British Isles were present.

7. cf. DS 3058

8. cf. DS 3058

9. cf. DV 12

10. cf. DV 9