

**A COMMENTARY ON  
THE GIFT OF AUTHORITY**

*By Mary Tanner*

## INTRODUCTION

### (i) What is the background to the Report?

For Anglicans and Roman Catholics agreement in matters of faith – sufficient agreement to bring us together and hold us together – is fundamental for full visible unity. Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI initiated a theological dialogue in 1968 which has continued for more than 30 years. In 1981 a milestone was reached with the publication of the *Final Report of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission*. It brought together agreed statements on the eucharist, ministry, and authority. The Report was widely studied. Clergy and laity in both churches, in many parts of the world, were genuinely excited by the fact that in areas where our churches were once bitterly divided, we could now confidently claim substantial agreement.

The Lambeth Conference in 1988 affirmed what was said about eucharist and ministry as ‘consonant in substance with the faith of the Anglicans.’ However, while both Communion recognised in the two texts on authority much with which they could agree, they also identified areas where further agreement needed to be reached : the relationship between Scripture, Tradition and the exercise of teaching authority; collegiality, conciliarity and the role of the laity in decision making; and the Petrine ministry of universal primacy. Both churches were confident that the work that had already been done gave grounds for believing that further agreement was possible. Now, eleven years later, the Commission offers more work on authority in, *The Gift of Authority (Authority III)*.

### (ii) Why is this Report important?

Both churches agree that we share a profound degree of communion based in our common baptism. Both churches are committed to making the gift of unity which God has promised the Church fully visible. Full visible communion entails the acceptance of a common authority. This in turn requires a shared understanding of authority. So, this further work on authority, with its deeper agreement, is vitally important if Anglicans and Roman Catholics are to live together in visible unity.

## I THE CONTROLLING THEME : GOD’S ‘YES’ AND OUR ‘AMEN’

The Report is not easy to summarise. Every sentence counts towards the building up of the whole. It repays slow and careful study. There is one controlling theme, imaginative and suggestive, which must be grasped in order to appreciate the advances in the understanding of authority being made in this Report. The controlling theme is ‘**God’s “Yes” to us and our “Amen” to God.**’ God’s will is to bring all people into communion with himself within transformed creation. In Jesus Christ, God not only affirms that purpose but also secures the outcome, demonstrating God’s everlasting ‘yes’ to us. In the faithful obedience of Jesus to the Father, Christians can recognise the perfect response of humanity, the perfect ‘Amen’ to God and to God’s purpose. In, with, and through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we speak our ‘Amen’ to God and God’s purpose for us. The life of the Christian, and the life of the community of the Church, is lived within the orbit of God’s continuous ‘yes’ to us and our attempt, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to say ‘Amen’ to God. The ministry of authority in the Church is to help the Church and the world to hear God’s ‘yes’ and to enable a response to be made to it. Within the framework of this controlling theme the exploration unfolds; first the nature of authority and then the way authority is exercised in the Church, including a ministry of primacy.

## II AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH (paras 7-31)

The description of how authority functions in the Church moves step by step:

- Authority in the Church is gift, God’s gift to his people, to enable the Church to live in the memory of God’s ‘yes’ made in Christ and to guide the Church to make its faithful response.

- The 'yes' of the individual Christian to the purposes of God is said within the faith of the Christian community – the local community of believers and the community of the faithful of all times and all places. This community of faith through time and space passes on the revealed faith through a rich life of Word and sacrament, and common life.
- Tradition is gift received from the past, and the treasure to be handed on in varied circumstances and continually changing times, What the apostles received and proclaimed is now found in the Tradition of the Church where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments of Christ are celebrated. The Scriptures occupy 'a unique and normative place' by which the Church measures its teaching and action when faced with new insights and challenges. 'Tradition', the Report says, is a 'channel of love' making the Gospel open to all people.
- The handing on of the Tradition is the responsibility and work of the whole people of God. The Report describes this dynamic receiving and passing on of the Tradition as being like a 'symphony' in which different parts are played. The theologian has a role. Those entrusted with oversight have their special role in keeping alive the memory of what God did in Christ and the hope of what God will bring to fulfilment.
- Those with oversight have to be attentive to the mind of all the faithful (the *sensus fidelium*). In the life of the Church the mind of the faithful and the 'ministry of memory' are always to be in reciprocal relationship.

Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree these things about authority in the Church, However, because the two Communion have lived separate lives they need now to learn from each other's insights. They need to grasp the opportunity to share the mind of the faithful and the ministry of memory within a larger community of believers. In this way Anglicans and Roman Catholics would share in receiving God's 'yes' together and learn to respond together in a single 'Amen'.

### III THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH (paras 32-50)

The Report offers a key concept with which to understand the functioning of authority in the Church. All the faithful are called to travel together, to walk together on the way. The Greek word *syn-hodos* lies behind the English word synodality. Synodality refers to the life of all those who walk together within the Tradition, those in the local church and those in the fellowship of all local churches across space and time.

#### (i) Synodality: Walking together on the way (paras 34-40)

- The exercise of authority has a missionary orientation in keeping the Church faithfully to the purposes of God and to invite all people to respond to God with 'Amen'.
- The bishop has oversight of the local church to lead churches in making their authentic 'Amen' to God. The faithful have a duty to receive the guidance and decisions of those with oversight as they recognise God at work in the bishop's exercise of authority. The bishop's authority is not arbitrary. It works within the 'sense of faith' of the community.
- No local church with its bishop is sufficient of itself. The local church lives in the Tradition as part of, and together with, the whole Church. The local bishop, through membership in the college of bishops, plays a part in enabling the local church to walk together on the way with the whole Church, Together the bishops seek to discern and articulate the mind of the faithful.

Once again Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree these things about the exercise of authority within the walking together on the way of the whole Church, even if the way the two Communion structure their lives today is not identical. In the Anglican Communion bishops, clergy and laity consult and legislate together in synods, where bishops play a distinct ministry in relation to matters of doctrine, worship and moral life. Forms of synodality exist at the local, provincial, and world levels. The Primates' Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury are instruments of synodality at the world level. In the Roman Catholic Church synodality exists in the meetings of bishops in episcopal conferences, in regional groups of bishops when they visit Rome

together. There has been a move to encourage the active participation of lay persons in the life and mission of local churches. Here the Report moves to a very important section.

**(ii) Perseverance in the truth: discerning together on the way (paras 41-44)**

Both churches are faced with the question of how truth is discerned in situations of challenge. The participation of the whole body, together with those charged with the ministry of memory are both indispensable.

- In discerning, the Church can be confident in Christ's promise to lead into all truth. In special circumstances those with the ministry of oversight come to a judgement faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition which is preserved from error.

'This is what is meant when it is affirmed that the Church may teach *infallibly*.' (para.42)

- The whole body of believers participates in discernment, not only those entrusted with the ministry of memory. Reception of teaching is an integral part of the process. And here comes a crucial sentence – 'Doctrinal definitions are received as authoritative in virtue of the divine truth they proclaim as well as because of the specific office of the persons who proclaim them within the *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God. When the people of God respond by faith and say "Amen" to authoritative teaching it is because they recognise that this teaching expresses the apostolic faith and operates within the authority and truth of Christ...' (para.43)
- There will be times when the *sensus fidelium* perceives a need for the Church to speak on a matter of faith and when it calls those with a ministry of oversight to speak. The episcopal college 'has power to exercise this ministry because it is bound in succession to the apostles, who were the body authorised and sent by Christ to preach the Gospel to all the nations'. (para. 44) The exercise of the teaching authority requires that what is taught is faithful to Scripture and consonant with Apostolic Tradition.

In this section a step has been taken beyond the agreements reached in *Authority I and II*. The delicate balance maintained in the treatment of the infallibility of authoritative teaching, which belongs to the Church, and takes place, under the guidance of the Spirit, within the life of the whole community under certain circumstances, is important for both churches. The Report has held together both the special services of a ministry of oversight and the role of all the faithful in the Church's ministry to teach infallibly. This has important consequences for both churches as they contemplate reform of their own lives today, and as they consider the possibility for the joint exercise of authority in the future. Now the Report has reached the subject that many will be waiting for.

**(ii) Primacy (paras 45-49)**

It is a fact that forms of primacy exist in both churches. Anglican provinces have their Primate, the Primate's Meeting serves the whole Anglican Communion, and the Archbishop of Canterbury exercises a primatial role in the Anglican Communion. The Report reflects that:

- Primatial and conciliar aspects of the ministry of oversight belong together at every level of the Church's life.
- From the New Testament times Peter's role amongst the Apostles strengthened the others. The Bishop of Rome has exercised a ministry of primacy sometimes for the benefit of the whole Church and sometimes as a benefit to a local church, as when Gregory the Great supported Augustine's mission.
- Within his wider ministry the Bishop of Rome offers a special ministry of discernment, which is often misunderstood. 'Every solemn definition' is pronounced *within* the college of those who exercise *episcopate* and not outside that college.' (para.47) Because the Bishop of Rome pronounces within the college of bishops, he proclaims not his own individual faith, but the faith of all the local churches.
- In order to teach, the Bishop of Rome must discern under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in fidelity to Scripture and Tradition. The Report sums it up thus: 'It is... the faith of all the baptised in communion, and this only, that each bishop utters with the body of bishops in council. It is this

faith which the Bishop of Rome in certain circumstances has a duty to discern and make explicit.’  
(para.47)

The Report makes clear that the reception of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome entails the recognition of this specific ministry of universal primacy. It is equally clear, and this is important for Anglicans, that authority is exercised by fragile Christians for the sake of fragile Christians. This is no less true of the successors of Peter. Indeed, Pope John Paul II in the Papal Encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, admits his own human frailty. The Report has gone a long way in examining those issues that were asked for by both Communion. It confidently claims that this understanding of authority and of its exercise is one that Anglicans and Roman Catholics can share. We have been helped to see that in the end, the aim of the exercise of authority and its reception is to enable the Church to say ‘Amen’ to God’s ‘Yes’.

#### **IV STEPS TOWARDS VISIBLE UNITY: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF THE REPORT? (paras 51-62)**

The Report does not only offer theological statement. It recognises that both churches are churches in change as far as the exercise of authority goes. The Anglican Communion is reaching towards universal structures which promote *koinonia*. The Roman Catholic Church is looking to strengthen local and intermediary structures. These changes are in fact complementary. The theological agreement offered in this Report entails challenges to both Communion:

##### **(i) Challenges to Anglicans (para.56)**

- ? Is the Anglican Communion open to the acceptance of instruments of oversight whose decisions would in certain circumstances bind all?
- ? Will the emerging new structures assist Anglicans to participate in the *sensus fidelium*, the mind of the Church, with all Christians?
- ? To what extent does unilateral action by provinces, even after consultation, weaken communion?
- ? The Anglican willingness to tolerate anomaly (for example in the different practices relating to the ordination of women) has led to impairment of communion in sharing eucharist and in exercising *episcopate* – what consequences flow from that?
- ? How will Anglicans respond to the question of universal primacy as it is emerging both in their own internal life and in ecumenical dialogue?

Very similar issues are treated in the *Virginia Report* which the bishops at the Lambeth Conference invited the provinces to study for the sake of strengthening the unity and communion of the Anglican Communion.

##### **(ii) Challenges to Roman Catholics (para.57)**

- ? How far do clergy and lay people in fact actively participate in the emerging synodal bodies of the Church?
- ? Has the teaching of Vatican II on the collegiality of bishops been implemented sufficiently?
- ? Has enough provision been made to ensure that consultation takes place between the Bishop of Rome and the local church prior to important decisions being made?
- ? How is the variety of theological opinion taken into account when decisions are made?
- ? Do the structures of the Roman Catholic Church adequately respect the exercise of *episcopate* at all levels of the Church’s life?
- ? How will the Roman Catholic Church address the question of universal primacy as it emerges in the dialogue called for by the Pope in *Ut Unum Sint*?

These are sharp questions put to each church. Much hangs on the way each church answers them, not only in words but in the re-formation of its own life. The questions call for a systematic, radical self examination leading to a renewal of our own exercise of authority and a commitment to exercise authority together within a visibly united Church.

### **(iii) Challenges to both churches (para.58)**

Both our Churches are challenged not only to do together whatever they can, but also to be together as much as they can. Bishops are encouraged to work together at regional and local levels, to participate in international meetings, with Anglicans accompanying Roman Catholic bishops on visits to Rome, teaching and acting together and sharing oversight of local ecumenical initiatives. It is unfortunate that the emphasis here is only upon episcopal sharing, especially in a Report so keen to point to the inextricable relation between the ministry of oversight and the mind of the whole people of God. There is much that the bishops of both Communion have to gain from listening to the laity of both Communion who today share together regularly in many areas of life and witness.

### **(iv) The Challenge of Universal Primacy : A gift to be shared (paras 60-63)**

The final section of the Report offers an attractive portrait of the ministry of universal primacy exercised in collegiality and conciliarity, a ministry of the servant of the servants of God, who upholds legitimate diversity and enhances unity; a ministry exercising leadership in the world and in the lives of both Communion, gathering for consultation and discussion. This portrait, will surely rejoice the heart of many Anglicans and Roman Catholics who long to be in visible unity and in communion together with the Bishop of Rome. They will find attractive the Commission's suggestion:

- That Anglicans be open to and desire a recovery and re-reception under certain conditions of the exercise of the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome;
- That Roman Catholics be open to and desire a re-reception of the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the offering of such ministry to the whole Church of God.

It is striking here that the Report talks of a re-reception of the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome by both churches. It is not a matter of Anglicans re-receiving from the Roman Catholic Church, but of both churches re-receiving together a renewed ministry of universal primacy.

## **V WHAT ARE WE TO DO WITH THE REPORT?**

This report deserves to be widely and critically studied, preferably in groups which include both Anglicans and Roman Catholics who can interpret to each other their different experiences of authority and their hopes for a common exercise of authority in the future. The members of the official Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue need to hear the reactions to their work from around the world. Those who exercise authority must guide the process of discernment and reflection on this Report and urge that agreements issue in those 'concrete steps' forward that were looked for in 1981. For without some changes being made in our lives and relationships, there will be little confidence in the effectiveness of the search for agreement in faith as one task on the way towards visible unity. *The Gift of Authority* is itself a gift, an instrument, to lead Anglicans and Roman Catholics to responds together to God's 'Yes' with a single 'Amen'.