

Joint Preparatory Commission for Dialogue between
the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church.

What should be the minimum structure and essential life
of the local church?

by

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The Committee of the 1930 Lambeth Conference which considered the organization of the Anglican Communion based their considerations "on acceptance of the ancient Catholic principle that the fundamental unit of Church organisation is the territorial Diocese under the jurisdiction of one Bishop". This is the principle upon which the organization of the Anglican Communion since the consecration of the first bishop for America in 1784 has proceeded, and it is in keeping with the statements of the formularies of the parent Churches of England, Ireland and Scotland.

Article 19 of the 39 Articles lays down that "Ecclesia Christi visibilis est coetus fidelium, in quo verbum Dei purum praedicatur et sacramenta, quoad ea quae necessario exiguntur, juxta Christi institutum recte administrantur". Since Article 26 states that "in Ecclesia visibili bonis mali semper sunt admixti" the words "coetus fidelium" are not to be taken as meaning a purist sect, e.g. Donatism, but as referring simply to those who have received and profess the Christian faith, to the baptized, without reference necessarily to the quality of their lives. The Church is marked by orthodoxy. In it the pure Word of God is preached, the sufficiency of the holy Scriptures is accepted and the three Creeds are thoroughly received and believed (Arts. 3 and 8).* It is further marked by the right administration of the sacraments (which in the language of the Articles means Baptism and the Eucharist), and this raises the question of the structure of the Church for Article 23 says: "Non licet cuiquam sumere sibi munus publice praedicandi aut administrandi sacramenta in ecclesia, nisi prius fuerit ad haec obeunda legitime vocatus et missus. Atque illos legitime vocatos et missos existimare debemus, qui per homines, quibus potestas vocandi ministros atque mittendi in Praedicationem Domini publice concessa est in ecclesia, co-optati fuerint et asciti in hoc opus". Article 36 and the Ordinal make it plain that in the view of the Church of England the bishops are the men who have this authority and that their ministry is that which has come down in the Church from the time of the Apostles. In this sense the episcopate forms the essential ministry upon which the ministries of priest and of deacon depend. A complete unit of the Church, therefore, involves an area of episcopal jurisdiction - a diocese is, as the Lambeth Conference Committee said, "the fundamental unit of Church organisation".

The same committee summarized the functions of Episcopacy in the following way: "the general superintendence of the Church and more especially of the Clergy; the maintenance of unity in the one Eucharist; the ordination of men to the ministry; the safeguarding of the faith; and the administration of the discipline of the Church". The relationship of a bishop to his diocese is most usually represented by the term "Father in God". This is the

* As the first four papers are devoted to aspects of the Word I have not thought it necessary to expand this theme here.

expression used by the archdeacon when he presents men to be ordained deacon or priest. The bishop is also a shepherd, and at his consecration is addressed by the archbishop in these words: "Be to the flock of Christ a shepherd, not a wolf; feed them, devour them not. Hold up the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, bring again the outcasts, seek the lost. Be so merciful, that ye be not too remiss; so minister discipline, that you forget not mercy: that when the chief Shepherd shall appear ye may receive the never-fading crown of glory". The Report Doctrine in the Church of England, (S.P.C.K. 1938), brings the two images together when it says: 'In the Church, the household of God, the Bishop should represent in his own appointed area the principle of Fatherhood.

An assemblage of persons cannot be a "father in God"; and the lack of this element is an impoverishment of the Church's spiritual life. The Bishop should always exercise Oversight as a father, not "as lording it over the flock"; and the individual man who holds the office of a Bishop should never forget that he is himself a sheep of Christ's flock who needs as much as any the benefit of pastoral care.' (p. 123)

Such language is in line with the pastoral emphasis found in those passages of the New Testament which refer to the ministry. In the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament which are relevant to this subject there is emphasis also on the liturgical functions of the bishop and upon his position as a centre of unity. In the oldest surviving consecration prayer Hippolytus brings together two thoughts of the bishop as 'feeding the flock' and serving God 'as Thine high priest'.

A serious question is raised as to what kind of community is presupposed by this concept of the episcopal office. If we are to take expressions such as 'father' and 'shepherd' as something more than merely romantic images it would seem to follow that a diocese must be of such a size as will make possible a personal relationship between bishop, clergy and people.

In the first place the priests of a diocese form with the bishop a corporate body. In the early churches this was visibly represented by their position, sitting to right and left of the bishop in the apse. In the Church of England today when a priest is instituted to a parish it is usual for the bishop to say 'Receive the care, thine and mine', emphasizing the extent to which they are associated in the pastoral charge. A proper ordering of the Church, therefore, would seem to require that a bishop has personal knowledge of all the clergy of the diocese and a degree of intimacy with each of them.* This aspect of the bishop as pastor parvorum is one which makes a particular appeal to many Christians of the non-episcopal churches and the lack of which they feel to be a defect in their own systems. A first criterion of the proper size of a diocese, therefore, might be the number of parishes whose clergy a bishop can be expected to know as individuals with whom he can have a real personal relationship. The experience of the Church of England suggests that about 200 is the appropriate maximum figure.

Parishes have been mentioned as the normal lowest unit of subdivision of a diocese. Of course the parochial structure of the older parts of Christendom cannot claim the theological significance of the diocese as a unit of the whole Church but it is

* Cf. Decretum de pastorali episcoporum munere in ecclesia paras. 16 and 28.

nevertheless an important part of the way in which pastoral care and evangelistic responsibility are exercised with a diocese. The parochial organization is based on the principle of caring for people where they live, and in the context of their families. For this reason it is likely to remain the principal unit of pastoral care within the diocese so long as family and home are significant aspects of human society. Alongside the parish, however, are other units of pastoral care related to the context in which people work or are temporarily resident. Such are the various forms of industrial mission, chaplaincies to Universities, schools, hospitals, prisons and so forth. It is sometimes suggested that these should be taken out of the care of the diocesan bishop and made into non-territorial dioceses. Such suggestions overlook the significance of the bishop as a centre of unity.*

St. Paul vividly expounds the way in which Christ's redeeming work has in principle broken down barriers among mankind - the wall of division in the Temple has gone and Jew and Gentile are made one in Christ, all living stones built up into one Temple in Him. It is the responsibility of the Church to continue in every age this work of making men one in Christ, and that responsibility has to be discharged in two ways. First the Church must take men as and where they are, it must minister to them in their natural context endeavouring to make them one with God, whole persons, in the setting in which God has placed them. For this reason the Church in every diocese must so direct its ministry that it finds out and meets men where they are. But secondly the Church must bring men together, crossing the barriers of division. There is always the danger that too close an identification of the Church with a section of life will deepen division rather than aid unity. This has happened and manifestly continues to happen by the too close identification of a Church with a nation or by having parishes which are for one race only. It can very easily happen if men become accustomed to worship only with those among whom they work. If the bishop is to be properly a centre of unity his ministry must not be of too specialized a kind, the diocese must be composed of a diversity of Christians whose unity displays the healing and re-creating work of Christ.

To this extent, therefore, Karl Rohner is right in arguing that "only the community in which the whole course of the Church's life - not merely the celebration of the Eucharist (sacrament) and the preaching of the Word - can be represented, is really the Church in its entirety, that is, a diocese". When bishops come together in council to deliberate for the well being of the Church, ecumenically or regionally, they ought not to be regarded as a special class of Christians magically endowed, but as the embodiment of the Christianity of their respective Churches. Similarly, Anglican schemes of what it is now usual to call 'synodical government', which produce assemblies of three houses of bishops, clergy and laity, would be on sounder lines if they emphasized more clearly that the bishop, clergy and laity from each diocese form, as it were, a diocesan delegation and ought to be the collective spokesmen of the Christianity of that diocese.

At this point it must, however, be emphasized that it is a generally accepted principle of Anglicanism that whereas in certain fields and for certain purposes authority vests with particular individuals and groups "the ultimate authority and right of collective action lie with the whole body, the Church, and that the co-operation of Clergy and Laity in Church Government and discipline

* cf. Decretum de pastorali episcoporum munere in ecclesia para. 23.

belongs to the true ideal of the Church". (Government by Synod p.14)
The sharp distinction between ecclesia docens and ecclesia discens is not congenial to Anglicans. This does not mean that they accept a presbyterian or a congregationalist policy. In all parts of the Anglican communion, except possibly the Church of Ireland, the special responsibilities of the episcopate are carefully safeguarded. In synods the bishops form a separate house and the assent of a majority of them is necessary before anything can be decided. Moreover it is often provided that matters of doctrine can only be voted on at the final stage in the form in which they are presented by the bishops. The responsibilities of the clergy are not always so carefully safeguarded, as in some parts of the communion their representatives are made to form one house with the representatives of the laity. This seriously obscures the position of the clergy as the ministerial associates of the bishops. In the Church of England the clergy not infrequently exercise a restraining influence on the bishops and the laity.

In the long run, however, it is acceptance by the whole body which is held to be decisive, the approbation of Christians of varying temperament and outlook. Sectarianism, psychological or doctrinal, is the antithesis of Anglicanism which has tried to comprehend diverse theological opinions within the historic framework of order and sacrament.

The Christian judgement on faith and morals is ultimately reached by the inter-action of various experiences and responsibilities which should take place at various levels, one of which is the diocese. The diocese must therefore be both large enough to contain an adequate representation of Christianity and small enough for a proper interaction of the responsibilities of bishop, priests and lay people. It is this second aspect of the matter which Rahner seems to overlook when he pleads for larger rather than smaller dioceses. His view of the episcopate seems to be determined by looking at the bishop primarily in relation to the whole Church, primarily as a member of the apostolic college, and only secondarily does he consider the bishop in his relationship to a given flock. This leads him to defend the practice of consecrating to the episcopate persons who have no defined flock e.g. the cardinals in Curia. This comes dangerously near to thinking of the episcopate in terms of status rather than of function, and such an outlook is not unknown in the Church of England. It has been put forward as an argument for having a bishop for the Universities that University authorities are more likely to listen to someone who is a bishop than to one who is only a priest. If what has been said earlier about the nature of a diocese and the bishop's place in it is correct then any use of episcopacy to give a person a certain rank without his being made the father of a specific and multifarious family, the shepherd of a defined but heterogeneous flock, the high priest of a particular albeit diversified part of the people of God, is a distortion of episcopacy.

So also is it an anomaly to consecrate a man to the episcopate with the intention that his ministry should be exercised in dependence upon another bishop, as a kind of secondary father-in-God in a diocese. There may be special circumstances in a particular diocese which make this necessary as a temporary expedient. Thus in missions it may be a desirable stage in the transition from a foreign to a native episcopate, or elsewhere as a preparation for the division of a diocese or to provide assistance for a bishop who is partly infirm but whose complete retirement would be a serious loss to the Church. These however are quite different circumstances from those in which suffragan bishops are at present

consecrated in the Church of England.* Of the forty three English dioceses thirty five have one or more suffragan bishops consecrated to titles of places within the diocese and performing such functions as the diocesan assigns to them. Of the remaining eight dioceses several have full-time assistant bishops who are suffragans in all but name. The principal reason for the existence of suffragans is to confirm and here a theological question concerning confirmation is raised. It is quite common to hear confirmation commended to members of non-episcopal churches by the argument that in it persons who have been baptized by their parish priest are appropriately brought to the head of the local church to be admitted as communicants. The history of the separation of baptism and confirmation in the West lends some support to this argument, but its force is greatly weakened if in fact the persons in question are confirmed not by the head of the local church, the diocesan, but by his deputy.

Another argument sometimes used to justify the existence of suffragan and assistant bishops is derived from the notion of the collegiality of the episcopate. It is suggested that a bishop ought to do his work in association with other bishops and that therefore there should be more than one bishop in a diocese. If pressed this would mean in some dioceses government by an episcopal committee, and what then becomes of the assertion of the Doctrine Commission that an assemblage of persons cannot be a "father in God"? The argument, however, suggests a defective understanding of two aspects of the episcopal office. If it means, as it appears to do in some cases, that bishops will only listen seriously to other bishops and can only unburden themselves to other bishops, then this shows a defective understanding of the proper relationship between a bishop and the clergy and people of his diocese, particularly those who form his connect or curia. A bishop should govern his diocese in association with clergy and people, not apart from them.

The argument also shows a defective understanding of the proper form of episcopal collegiality which is in the first instance the association of the bishops of a province. This is something which has particular importance for Anglicanism. As a religious organization separated from the rest of Christendom Anglicanism was originally embodied in six provinces, four Irish and two English. In the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries the extension of Anglicanism in other parts of the world has proceeded by the creation of dioceses and the subsequent grouping of these into provinces. Resolution 43 of the Lambeth Conference of 1920 lays down the principle that the attachment of dioceses to neighbouring provinces should everywhere be encouraged and suggests that four is the minimum number of dioceses suitable to form a province. Provincial organization is one of the oldest features of the organization of the Church, being discernible in outline in the second century and being presupposed everywhere by the cencus of Nicea. The term is used now to mean both the grouping together of the dioceses of a particular country such as South Africa or New Zealand, and the more technical sense of the province as it is seen in England, Canada and Australia where more provinces than one are associated together in a regional or national constitution. While the province cannot claim the fundamental theological significance of the diocese it does nevertheless bear witness to an important theological principle, namely that no unit of Christendom, no diocese, can properly live by itself alone but must bring its experience to and learn from the total life of the Church. In particular the

* The Decree de pastorali munere episcoporum paras 25 and 26 describes a similar institution in the Roman Church and does not seem to recognize any inconsistency with what has been said earlier about the personal character of the bishop's office.

the individual bishop exercises the wider aspects of the episcopal office first of all in association with his fellow diocesans in the province, and he himself receives oversight and care through them and through the metropolitan. So in Anglican policy, in accordance with primitive precedent, it is by his co-provincials that a bishop is tried.

It is serious defect and a growing weakness in Anglicanism that it has failed so far to work out a coherent and soundly based scheme of jurisdictional relationship between provinces. As has been said there are parts of the Anglican communion in which several provinces are joined together by a legal constitution to form one regional or national Church. Other such churches consist of one province only. There is no common legal bond between the various churches of the Anglican Communion, or between any of them and the Old Catholic Churches, yet all are in full communion with each other and there is in principal no bar to interchange of ministers or members. Yet in theory each Church is free to go its own way and, subject to the possibility of the withdrawal of communion, no part of the Anglican Communion has any right in Canon law to check aberrations in any other part. The Lambeth Conference is a purely advisory body, it has no canonical authority over the churches whose bishops attend it. Consequently the movements towards Christian unity in various parts of the world place great strains upon the internal unity of the Anglican Communion. In South India four dioceses left the Anglican Communion to enter a union with other Christian bodies and form a new Church of South India. Other schemes of union are designed to ensure as far as can be that the united church will be in communion with the Anglican churches but so far there has been no agreement, and indeed comparatively little discussion about the proper structure of relationships between churches. In the past Anglican emphasis has been on the independence of local churches. It is time that more attention was devoted to the problem of interdependence.

Nevertheless it is on the question of the rights and independence of the local church that there appears to be a major difference of emphasis between the Roman Catholic position and that of the Anglican Communion and the Old Catholics. Historically this difference is seen most clearly in the story of the separation of the Church of Utrecht from Rome when the issue was very largely the question whether the papacy had the right to dissolve the constitution of a local church and prevent it from electing a bishop to its vacant see. Anglicans recognise a duty of concern for the well being of churches in other lands, but except where some agreed constitution lays upon a particular person a canonical obligation, they do not recognise any right to interfere uninvited in the affairs of other churches. Most Anglicans would probably see no great difficulty in giving to the Papacy the kind of appellate jurisdiction assigned to it by the Council of Sardica. Where they would find difficulty is in being asked to acknowledge that the Pope has by divine commission the right to intervene with ordinary authority in the affairs of local churches, to restrict their bishops in their pastoral office, or to suppress local hierarchies. That there should be some generally accepted and recognised method of dealing with the problem of aberrations in local churches is one thing. To claim that God has provided one which we must simply accept is quite another.

Note

This paper has been written on the basis of what is accepted by the Anglican communion as proper for itself and has urged upon other Churches in the cause of Christian unity. Anglicans differ among themselves about the degree of obligation which attaches to episcopacy. The most consistently common Anglican view has been to regard those parts of Christendom which do not have the episcopate as 'defective Churches'. If any minister of one of those Churches desires to minister as an Anglican all parts of the Anglican communion would agree in treating him as if he were a layman and ordaining him priest. Individual Anglicans, however, are prepared on occasion to receive the sacraments at the hands of those who have not been episcopally ordained, though the more general Anglican practice is not to do so. Anglicans as a whole are nowadays reluctant to make negative statements about the ministries, sacraments and ecclesial standing of other Christian bodies.