



UNDERSTANDING *THE GIFT OF AUTHORITY*

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The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III, published in 1999, is an Agreed Statement by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). As such it is part of a process that began in this city thirty-three years ago when Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury (Michael Ramsey) declared their intention 'to inaugurate between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion a serious dialogue which, founded on the Gospels and on the ancient common traditions, may lead to that unity in truth for which Christ prayed'. (*Common Declaration*, Rome, Saint Paul Without-the-Walls, 24 March, 1966). Although there have been serious obstacles standing in the way, the unswerving aim since then has been, and continues to be, 'a restoration of complete communion of faith and sacramental life'. (*ibid.*)

The process led quickly to the establishment of ARCIC. ARCIC soon published Agreed Statements on two of the three areas where serious obstacles had been thought to be present. The two areas were Eucharistic Doctrine (1971) and Ministry and Ordination (1973). With these two publications, even before the long process of reception by the churches had scarcely begun, it was clear that the communion in faith of Anglicans and Roman Catholics was deeper and wider than most of us had recognized. We began to learn what it was like to be in real yet imperfect communion. We were surprised to find ourselves agreeing. Of course, ARCIC needed to produce Elucidations and Clarifications of the Agreements, and the churches needed time to study and understand and assess the Statements. But with the Lambeth Conference Resolution in 1988, and a letter from Cardinal Cassidy to ARCIC in 1994, ARCIC's work in these areas appears to be finished and accepted by our Authorities. Of course, the process of reception in which agreement in faith bears fruit in the life of all the local churches has still a long way to go.

Questions on the one hand surrounding the concrete reality of the widespread ordination of women to the priesthood, and increasingly to the episcopate, within the Anglican Communion, and on the other hand, raised by the equally concrete refusal of the Roman Catholic Church to allow that the Church has authority to do such a thing, create fresh obstacles for the full reception and expression of our existing agreements on Eucharist and ordained Ministry. However, the questions do not undermine the agreement in faith. The questions are, in fact, primarily questions to do with Authority. Authority is the third of the areas where serious obstacles were thought to exist when ARCIC began its work.

A first Statement on Authority in the Church was published in 1976, followed by an Elucidation of the first Statement together with a second Statement in 1981. I think that it is true to say that this time many people were shocked, rather than pleasantly surprised, by the notion that we might be able to agree about Authority in the Church. These documents demonstrated substantial agreement about most aspects of Authority but also identified areas for continuing study. In 1981 ARCIC suggested 'that some difficulties will not be wholly resolved until a practical initiative has been taken and our two Churches have lived together more visibly in the one *koinonia*' (*Authority in the Church II*, 33). However, more study and dialogue were called for by our authorities and no clear message indicated what kind of a 'new relationship' might be established 'as a next stage in the journey towards Christian unity' (*ibid.* Conclusion).

After 1981 ARCIC turned its attention to some of the other questions which our Authorities had by then asked us to study. The subject of Authority, however, was never off the agenda, since it touches all the other areas in ARCIC's mandate. In recent years ARCIC has returned specifically to the examination of the exercise of authority in the Church, seeking to identify where there might be church-dividing issues. ARCIC's mandate does not extend to the study of every interesting aspect of a theological or doctrinal matter. ARCIC is to address obstacles to full ecclesial communion, i.e. church-dividing issues only. Obviously, it is not possible to avoid reaffirming truths about which we have never disagreed. Nevertheless, our agenda is governed by alleged disagreement. For example, the Lambeth Conference in 1988 welcomed 'the assurance that, within an understanding of the Church as communion,' that ARCIC was to explore 'continuing questions of authority, including the relation of Scripture to the Church's developing Tradition and the role of laity in decision-making within the

Church'. The Conference welcomed '*Authority in the Church I and II*, together with the *Elucidation*, as a firm basis for the direction and the agenda of the continuing dialogue on authority.' The Bishops encouraged ARCIC 'to continue to explore the basis in Scripture and Tradition of the concept of a universal primacy, in conjunction with collegiality, as an instrument of unity, the character of such a primacy in practice, and to draw upon the experience of other Christian Churches in exercising primacy, collegiality and conciliarity' (Lambeth Conference, 1988, Resolution 8). As an Anglican member of the Commission I had to keep these words in mind and ensure that the underlying concerns the words revealed were all addressed.

It took a long time to produce *The Gift of Authority*. Now that it is before the churches it is important to remember that it is part of the life of both the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. The two Churches asked for this study and set the direction for it. They will now study it and assess it. The Anglican Consultative Council has commended this Agreed Statement (and other ARCIC documents not yet formally considered) to the provinces for 'careful and critical study over the next five years, particularly with a view to considering any outstanding issues of ecclesiology and authority'. A report on this process will be made at the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in 2005. I should not think that the Catholic Church would necessarily be any faster than the Anglicans in responding to the challenges that cannot be avoided by the churches if they study the document.

As our Churches begin to study *The Gift of Authority* there may be some ways to make it easier to understand.

I made a promise to myself never to summarize *The Gift of Authority*. If you want to know what is in it you should read it. Beware of the summaries from those who have attempted them. They have to be selective, yet the whole document hangs together. I challenge you to read it carefully from the beginning, without giving in to the temptation to read the final sections first. Perhaps even then you will not want to go where it takes you. But you can then go back and ask at which point did the argument fail to persuade you? Or what did you have to reject, and why? The document challenges the churches to see Authority in the Church as a gift from God. This gift of authority from the author of life is gracious, life-giving and liberating. The uncomfortable aspect of this way of thinking of

authority is that it is hard to justify a refusal to accept a good gift from God.

The document is the fruit of careful and prayerful dialogue. It is not the result of bargaining or negotiation. The Commission believes that it expresses an authentic agreement. It is remarkable therefore that both churches are presented with challenges that seem balanced. It would be difficult to decide whether more is asked of one than of the other church.

The Agreed Statement puts considerable emphasis on God's 'Yes' to humanity and our 'Amen' to God. You will want to meditate on as study this theme, particularly as it is presented in 2 Corinthians 1.18-20:

¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes'. ²⁰For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'. For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen', to the glory of God.¹

God's 'Yes' to us is truly amazing. Even after our rejection of God's ways and our persistent disobedience, God continues to be faithful and says 'Yes' to us in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ also humanity can say 'Amen' to God. God's action in Christ and the human response in Jesus Christ are the key to everything else in the document and the reason why we Anglicans and Roman Catholics must find agreement.

Because the areas which ARCIC was asked to study in this phase of its work are largely to do with the exercise of authority, particular attention had to be given to experience. Of course, theology tends to describe the ideal, what ought to be the case. Yet when ARCIC speaks of the believer's 'Amen' in the 'Amen' of the local church, it intends to describe what believers will recognize as their experience. What are the implications of baptism for believers when they accept the authority of the Gospel and promise to follow Christ? This is what Authority in the Church serves. It is to help disciples to follow Jesus.

The concepts of *reception* and *re-reception* need to be carefully understood. At the risk of oversimplifying I suggest that you will not go far wrong if you remember that the key to understanding the concept of *reception* is that what is received must be recognized as from God. So

reception cannot be determined by either popular opinion or the decision of leaders in the community unless they are convinced that what is proposed comes from God. *Re-reception* is important, for example, because the Gospel of God must be proclaimed afresh in changing circumstances and different cultures. It is important too because sometimes some aspect of the apostolic Tradition has been obscured, or forgotten, or offered in a way that has made it too difficult, unnecessarily difficult, to receive. Think carefully about what the document says about re-reception. Think of your own examples of what needs to be re-received. I would not be surprised if members of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary were to claim that their mission of promoting an ecumenical understanding of Mary's place in the life of the Church was an exercise of *re-reception* for Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Orthodox, Lutherans and all who are open to receive a gift from God.

Synodality is another key concept that will not at first sound familiar to many readers, but which, I believe, will be quickly understood and welcomed.

In each local church all the faithful are called to walk together in Christ. The term *synodality* (derived from *syn-hodos* meaning 'common way') indicates the manner in which believers and churches are held together in communion as they do this. It expresses their vocation as people of the Way (cf. Acts 9.2) to live, work and journey together in Christ who is the Way (cf. John 14.6). They, like their predecessors, follow Jesus on the way (cf. Mark 10.52) until he comes again. (*Gift of Authority*, 34)

The Commission uses the concept because it can be concretely expressed in many forms in different circumstances and cultures. The Eucharist is an expression of *synodality* that is constitutive of every local church. The Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops that is meeting now, and the Synod of the Archdeaconry of Italy and Malta that met last month at Palazzola where your society is now meeting, are very different expressions of *synodality*. Anglicans and Roman Catholics have within their churches a wide variety of 'synodal institutions' with a common purpose: 'to help all the faithful to walk together in Christ'. We need to ask of ourselves and of each other whether those institutions are sufficient. Do we each need to learn from each other about effective *synodality*? Do we both need to be open to fresh expressions of *synodality*?

that will allow Anglicans and Roman Catholics to walk more closely together in Christ?

The Gift of Authority claims to have advanced the agreement beyond the earlier ARCIC documents on Authority in the Church. I hope that is true. However, this new agreement is built firmly on the foundations of the previous documents and would have been impossible to develop without them. Therefore a serious study and assessment of *The Gift of Authority* will demand careful attention also to the earlier texts. This study will also be helped by reading the other ARCIC documents, especially but not only *Church as Communion*.

I shall be very sad if the document is treated as a smorgasbord. It has many attractive aspects. But some people will be attracted to some parts and others to others. For example, it includes strong and robust affirmations about the *sensus fidelium* and the whole body of the faithful, the role of the bishops and their collegiality are presented as immensely important, and the ministry of the Bishop of Rome as universal primate is presented as a gift to be shared. It is not the intention of the document to offer more than is palatable in the hope that some part will be welcomed.

Finally, I want to invite you to take very seriously and personally the challenge to think about the interim stage in which we live. We are in 'in between times'. So long as the great anomaly of our sad division persists we shall have to live with anomalous situations in our church life. We are, as we repeatedly affirm, living in real yet imperfect communion. But we could do much more to make visible the communion that already exists, and we could take bold steps forward here and now, even before all the obstacles have been overcome. There are many such steps that we can and should take. I invite you to consider seriously and prayerfully one that ARCIC has proposed. Can we together re-receive the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome, in such a way that Roman Catholics can offer and Anglicans can receive that ministry? After all, if this ministry is a gift from God, then Roman Catholics do not have the right to keep it to themselves by offering it in such a way that it cannot be received by others with whom they are already in communion, and Anglicans do not have the right to define themselves simply as people who reject the ministry of the Bishop of Rome – if it is from God. I believe that it is, in the context that is described in *The Gift of Authority*.

1. *The New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1989.

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