

The Gift of Authority

Article for St Matthew's Parish Magazine

Why dialogue?

Some Christians are impatient with the ecumenical movement, believing that there are evangelical, prophetic and mission challenges before the Churches that should have priority claim on our time and resources. Indeed, in an age of rapidly evolving technology, of continued civil and ethnic strife, of a widening gap between rich and poor, and of a severe ecological crisis, ecumenical dialogue on matters of faith and order which seeks to resolve historical divisions between Churches may appear irrelevant. Yet, Anglicans maintain that the search for the *visible unity* of the Church is not merely a luxury but a necessary task if the Church is to fulfil its mission. The words of the 1958 Lambeth Conference express this well: "A divided Church cannot heal the wounds of a divided world." So, ecumenical dialogue leading to the healing of divisions, is the work of removing that which obscures the Gospel message of reconciliation and hope. ARCIC (The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission), the official international dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, is one of the most hopeful and at the same time challenging dialogues in the Christian world today.

Some history

In 1966 the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Michael Ramsey paid an official visit to Pope Paul VI and they decided to set up an official body to work for the unity for which Christ prayed (cf. John 17.21). The Commission, appointed by the Archbishop and the Vatican, first met in 1970 and published *The Final Report* in 1982. This report brought together agreed statements on *Eucharistic Doctrine, Ministry and Ordination*, and two statements on *Authority in the Church*. These have been three key areas of controversy between our two Churches throughout the centuries of separation.

The Final Report was submitted to the authorities of both Churches. Anglican provinces reviewed the report and submitted their findings to the Lambeth Conference of 1988. The Conference recognised that the statements on eucharist and ministry are "consonant in substance with the faith of Anglicans." One cannot underestimate the significance of this achievement. Our parents and grandparents would be amazed to find that Anglicans and Roman Catholics could have reached such a level of consensus on the meaning of the mass and the understanding of the priesthood.

But, you may ask if Anglicans and Roman Catholics could *ever* reach agreement on the ministry and place of a Universal Primate in the Church. It is true that consensus on authority, particularly the authority of the Bishop of Rome, such a key element in the division that occurred at the time of the English Reformation has taken longer to achieve. The 1988 Lambeth Conference, while welcoming *Authority in the Church (I and II)* "as a firm basis for the direction and agenda of the continuing dialogue," at the same time encouraged further work on issues of scripture, tradition, primacy, collegiality and conciliarity. This most recent report, *The Gift of Authority* (Authority in the Church III), published on 12 May this year, the product of over 5 years of

prayerful dialogue and study, has achieved an agreement that is remarkably broad and deep.

What does this report claim?

The report is a short booklet of 63 paragraphs. When you read it, however, try not to flip immediately to the final paragraphs. It is important to work through the entire document in order to appreciate fully the reasoning, since every sentence, every paragraph builds towards the conclusions.

Even the title of the document is significant: *The Gift of Authority*. It is somewhat provocative these days to speak of authority as something positive, let alone as gift. Yet the Commission believes this to be true; divine authority is a gift, a gift from a loving God, and that true authority reveals the love of God who is the *author* of life and all creation.

A considerable section of the text is an exploration of an image from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: God's "Yes" to humanity, and humanity's response of "Amen" back to God. It is in Jesus Christ, both Son of God and Son of Mary, that the "Yes" of God is united to the "Amen" of the human race. The exercise of authority in the Church is to enable the world to hear God's "Yes" (in Jesus Christ) and to help the world to respond ("Amen"). It is good to be reminded that such a common word on the lips of the faithful, "amen" (literally "truly" "surely" "so be it") is related to the Great Amen of the whole Church to God and thus is part of the exercise of authority.

Readers will next find a rich section on the relation of Scripture and Tradition. This has been a vexed point in ecumenical dialogue. Many Christians, especially of the Reformed school, maintain that there is no room for Tradition since Scripture alone should be sufficient. (A battle cry of the Reformation was *sola scriptura* "by scripture alone".) In *The Gift of Authority* we find Tradition understood as "the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church." It is part of the Church's apostolicity, the saving Gospel received and proclaimed and transmitted by every generation. Scripture is situated within the context of Tradition as "uniquely inspired," "normative" and "uniquely authoritative." Thus the text addresses the mistaken opposing of Scripture and Tradition and demonstrates the inseparable harmony and relationship between them. Furthermore, in a very useful example, we are shown how the acceptance of the canon of Scripture was a itself an exercise of authority and obedience in the Church.

The text then moves on to consider how authority, now understood through the biblical metaphor of "Yes" and "Amen," is exercised in the Church, in order to enable the whole Church to embody the Gospel and truly be the missionary and prophetic servant of the Lord. This is done through the exploration of an important concept, *synodality*. Derived from the Greek *syn-hodos* meaning "common way" or "walking together," synodality describes the manner in which the all the faithful have a role in the Church's ministry to teach, even when the Church teaches infallibly.

Each baptised member of the Body, worshipping and living as a faithful member of the Church has a supernatural gift enabling him or her to be conscious of and discern the faith. Technically, this is called the *sensus fidei*. The exercise of this capacity, by all the faithful in concert, including those who have oversight (bishops), is termed the *sensus fidelium*. Anglicans have long emphasised the participation of all the faithful, bishops, priests, deacons and laity, in the governance of the Church and therefore are

somewhat familiar with synodality. We experience the Church “walking together on the way” in meetings of synods, or at the international level in meetings of the Anglican Consultative Council, the Primates and the Lambeth Conference. Within the whole body, bishops have a specific charism and ministry “to keep alive in the Church the memory of what God did and revealed, and the hope of what God will do to bring all things into unity in Christ.” In other words, they ensure that the one faith delivered to the Apostles is communicated and lived in each place and in each generation. *The Gift of Authority* emphasises how this particular ministry of the bishops is in symphony with, and operates within the whole body of believers, and thus is in mutual relationship to the *sensus fidelium*.

It is within this understanding of exercise of authority within the whole Church that the report next addresses how the Church is maintained in the truth (technically called “indefectibility”). Christ promises the Holy Spirit will guide the Church into all truth (cf Jn 16.13). In special times of challenge, however, there is a need for the Church to be able to give teaching that can be trusted as true. The document outlines how the bishops, those with the ministry of oversight, “assisted by the Holy Spirit, may together come to a judgement which, being faithful to Scripture and consistent with apostolic Tradition, is preserved from error.” “This,” says the document, “is what is meant when it is affirmed that the Church may teach *infallibly*.” No one may fear that in teaching infallibly there will be an arbitrary exercise of power by some in the Church over others. Anglicans and Roman Catholics are reminded that this particular ministry is exercised *within* the body of the faithful and not *apart* from it and the faith that is thus proclaimed is the apostolic faith shared by all.

The Pope

Based on the newspapers’ reaction to the publication of *The Gift of Authority*, you would think that the breakthrough in the document was the suggestion that the Bishop of Rome should exercise a primatial ministry at the universal level within the Church. Actually, this alone is nothing new to Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue. Anglicans already experience primacy, within our provinces, and in indeed the Archbishop of Canterbury exercises a sort of primatial role within the Communion as a whole. Furthermore the previous ARCIC statements on authority have already recognised, not only the need for a Universal Primacy, but that this ministry should be exercised by the Bishop of Rome.

Where the present document does break new and important ground is in identifying how the Bishop of Rome, within his wider ministry, and under certain circumstances, has a duty to discern and make explicit, in fidelity to Scripture and Tradition, the authentic faith of the whole Church. In this, no one is attributing to the Pope some magical power of oracle. Indeed, the document asserts that this particular ministry is exercised by “fragile Christians for the sake of other fragile Christians.” This specific ministry of the Bishop of Rome is exercised within the college of all the bishops, and so he proclaims the faith of all the local churches, not merely his own individual faith.

The Challenges

The theology contained in *The Gift of Authority* has implications for the life of the Churches, and thus we find some challenges to both.

Anglicans must consider, for instance, whether the Churches of the Communion are open to accepting instruments of oversight whose decisions would be *binding*. (At

present, decisions of international bodies such as the Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Consultative Council are said to have “moral” but not “binding” authority.) Most importantly, Anglicans need to address the question of universal primacy, a question arising from our life together as Communion and from our ecumenical dialogue.

Roman Catholics need to consider the extent to which lay people and clergy actively participate in the emerging synodal bodies, and the level of consultation which takes place between the Bishop of Rome and local churches. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Ut unum sint* called for a “patient and fraternal dialogue” about the exercise of the office of the Bishop of Rome, to see how it might be a ministry of love and unity for all.

Anglicans and Roman Catholics already share a real but partial communion, and both Churches should make this existing level of communion more visible by doing together whatever they can. Moreover, as Anglicans move to address issues of authority at the universal level and Roman Catholics move to address issues of authority locally and synodically, the two Communion will be moving in direction that brings them closer.

In the meantime, even before visible unity is realised, *The Gift of Authority* makes its most notable and surprising suggestion: That Anglicans recover, even now, the exercise of universal primacy by the Bishop of Rome. The corollary for Roman Catholics is that they offer the exercise of primacy by the Bishop of Rome to the whole Church of God. Both Churches are challenged to *receive together* a renewed primacy, as gift.

Such a suggestion requires humility from all, and a putting aside of historical prejudice and the recovery of a genuine yearning for full visible unity of all Christians.

What about St Matthew's?

The Gift of Authority is an agreement by theologians appointed by the highest level of both Churches, and is now before both Communion for study and discussion. Over the next few years, Anglicans and Roman Catholics will need to formulate ways to officially receive and respond to the statement. In this, every level of the Church should be engaged: parish, deanery, diocese, province and Communion, and if such discussion and study can be *joint*, involving members and leaders of both Churches, so much the better.

Needless to say, our life and mission will go on, the sacred mysteries will be celebrated and daily prayer will be offered as before. But perhaps special intention should be offered for the Holy Spirit to guide us along this path, which, despite history and genuine differences is our calling, since we believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. *The Gift of Authority* gives us a fitting prompting and holds before us a promising vision, at the dawn of a new millennium.

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