

MYSTERIUM ECCLESIAE: AN ANGLICAN COMMENT

I

There is much in the Declaration Mysterium Ecclesiae which an Anglican may wholeheartedly welcome.

(1) The language is generally conciliatory and unauthoritarian and wide use is made of the documents of Vatican II. Thus the declaration goes out of its way to recognise "the truly Christian endowments, derived from our common heritage, which are to be found among our separated brethren" and to admit that the Church, "embracing sinners in her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified."

(2) The "certain shared infallibility", which God is alleged to have bestowed upon the Church, is not seen as limited to the Pope or the bishops, but as given to "the body of the faithful as a whole" when "it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals".

(3) While the special teaching office (magisterium) in the Church is affirmed, it is repeatedly attributed to the episcopate as a whole, and only rarely (though then quite clearly) is the special place of the Pope asserted. The authentic teaching of the faith is the function of "the successors of Peter and the other apostles."

(4) It is made plain that in their teaching office the bishops are not to give publicity to their own bright ideas or elaborate theological speculations, but to preserve and proclaim the truth committed by God to the Church. This does not exempt them from, but rather imposes on them, the task of studying "with appropriate means the treasure of divine revelation contained both in sacred Scripture... and the living tradition". But it is stressed that the teaching function of the bishop as such and that of the theologian are not identical.

(5) A clear recognition, and indeed an extended discussion, is given of the famous assertion of Pope John XXIII that the unchangeable deposit of the faith is one thing and its manner of presentation is another.

(6) There is by implication a rejection of any triumphalist or separationist doctrine of the ordained ministry of the Church. Christ, we are told, "granted his Church a share in his priesthood, which consists of the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood. These differ from each other not only in degree but also in essence; yet they are mutually complementary within the communion of the Church." This seems to me to be consistent with, though verbally different from, the ARCIC "Canterbury Statement" and I would add in passing that the alleged contradiction between the interpretations placed on a sentence in that Statement by Bishop Clark and the Revd. Julian Charley seems to me to have been greatly exaggerated.

Having said this, I venture to draw attention to a number of points which seem to me to need either clarification or deeper investigation, not primarily in order to remove difficulties felt by Anglicans or others outside the Roman Communion but in the service of theological truth.

(1) The notion of infallibility in general, as distinct from the infallibility of some particular organ or institution in the Church, needs development. As frequently understood,

and rejected, by non-Romans it is either logically circular or else self-contradictory. This therefore cannot be the sense which Roman Catholics give it. Does it really differ from what Anglicans have described as "indefectibility"? Can one understand the guidance of the Holy Spirit as having a cybernetic character, not preserving a rigid exactitude of teaching by the Magisterium but correcting divagations and preventing complete departure from the true road of doctrinal teaching and development?

(2) Does Mysterium Ecclesiae take adequate account of certain problems relating to the developed position of the Pope? I have in mind such points as the following:

(i) This's books La Primauté pontificale and L'Infaillibilité pontificale leave the impression that the Fathers of Vatican I were given by the official proponents of the definitions a minimising concept of papal infallibility and a maximising concept of papal primacy. (A cynic might suggest, unjustly I think, that this was because primacy was exercised every day, but infallibility very rarely!)

(ii) Tierney has shown how in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the popes themselves were against the notions of infallibility and irreformability, since they wished to be able to contradict the teaching of their predecessors, whereas the Franciscans upheld papal infallibility to prevent reversal of papal approval of their doctrine of poverty. Thus infallibility and primacy seem to have been in conflict!

(iii) In view of Vatican II's teaching about the Eastern Churches, can Brocard Sewell's thesis be upheld that, since the schism there has been no Council that is fully ecumenical?

(iv) Patriarch Maximos IV argued that, outside the Western Patriarchate, the Pope's authority was limited to matters of great urgency and matters affecting the whole Church. At the canonisation of the English Martyrs Pope Paul VI was emphatic that, if reunion between Rome and Canterbury took place, the English Church would not lose its legitimate freedom. Is there a common dogmatic presupposition behind these two statements? Is it, e.g. a matter of divine law or of long standing practice that in the Roman Communion the appointment of bishops is made (or at least must be confirmed) by the Pope?

(v) G. Sweeney argues (Clergy Review, Feb. 1974) that Vatican I defined the papal Primacy, but did not state its limits; and that the majority view was that it was not unlimited. He argues that by divine right the Pope has the primacy necessary to preserve the unity of the Church, but that it is possible that its extension beyond that limit comes not from divine right but from the consensus of the Church. This might imply that some apparently autocratic acts, for which, significantly, any infallible character has been clearly disclaimed, (e.g. Humanae vitae) can be interpreted as exercises of an authority based on the consent of the Church, and therefore having a moral force proportionate to the extent of that consent, and not on divine right.

II

It is important to distinguish between the substance of Mysterium Ecclesiae and the organ and circumstances of its promulgation. It is well known that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - and not only that Congregation - was

seriously worried by the radical character of the writings of certain theologians, who seemed to deny the very nature of the Christian Faith, as a divine revelation entrusted to the Church and its magisterium, and to take as the criterion of Christian truth the mood of the contemporary world and the opinions of the radical theologians. An Anglican, unless he is himself a radical theologian, may well hold that the Church has a right and a duty to warn its members against false and dangerous doctrine, while at the same time doubting that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is the appropriate organ of the Magisterium and that its Declaration is entirely satisfactory. And it is perhaps relevant to note that, while the Congregation had a great deal to say about the infallibility of the Church as a whole and the infallibility of the episcopal college, it had nothing to say about its own infallibility, or indeed about its own authority. Indeed, it would appear that the authority which the Declaration possesses comes from its ratification by the Pope and that the Congregation is to be taken as a useful administrative body having in itself no theological and ecclesial character.

To hold the correct balance between the teaching authority of the Church and the rights of scholars to conduct their researches in freedom has never been an easy matter in any religious communion, in the Anglican no more than in the Roman. An over-hasty tendency of Anglican bishops in the last century to repudiate findings of scholarship which seemed to be subversive of the Faith has been succeeded by a tendency to capitulate without demur to almost any view that claims to be in line with modern scholarship and the spirit of the age. And even in the Roman communion the unhappy experience of the handling of Modernism has led to a certain note of hesitancy which can be discerned in Mysterium Ecclesiae itself. What I would suggest is urgently needed on the part of both the Magisterium and the Studium is the recognition of the necessarily unfinal character of their conclusions and their utterances. For the statements of the Magisterium are usually made to deal with the needs of a particular situation which is probably transient and are expressed in the idiom of a particular cultural outlook, while the conclusions of scholars are admittedly provisional and open to correction by their successors. Furthermore, there appear to be two distinct views about the nature of theological study itself. According to one view theology is an academic discipline like any other, differing from them only by its subject matter and requiring primarily in its practitioners a well trained critical mind; according to the other it is essentially an ecclesial activity which attempts to penetrate the mystery of the Church's faith from within and requires from those who practise it primarily a conscious identification with the Church's inner life and the virtues of faith and charity. So far from these being incompatible they are both present in the really great theologians. What is to be deplored is the assumption, widespread today among scholars as well as among the faithful and their pastors, that free and honest scholarship is bound to lead to results that are opposed to the traditional beliefs of the Church. When such results appear it will usually be found that the scholarship itself has been defective.

III

One of the most important sections of Mysterium Ecclesiae is that in which while a clear distinction is drawn between the absolute and transcendent nature of the Christian mysteries and the inevitably relative and historically conditioned nature of their expression in human language, it is firmly asserted that "as for the meaning of dogmatic formulas, this remains

ever true and constant in the Church, even when it is expressed with greater clarity or more developed." This obviously raises a number of problems which need the attention of theologians, philosophers and linguistic scholars alike, but the assertion itself seems to me to be undeniable if Christianity is in any genuine sense a revealed religion. It is, nevertheless, regrettable that the Declaration did not recognise explicitly that, in its non-infallible utterances, the Magisterium may sometimes fall into error or self-contradiction. I will give only one instance, namely the direct contradiction between the solemn teaching of the Council of Florence about the fate of those who die outside the visible communion of the Church (DS 1351) and the teaching on the same subject of Vatican II (Lumen Gentium 14 et al.). When all allowances have been made for differences of cultural situation and idiom, it still seems impossible to deny that one of the councils was mistaken. And it seems to me that to admit this does not in fact weaken the authority of the Magisterium and is more satisfactory than what a recent writer has called "ecclesial amnesia".

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