

Subcommission IIIDraft II30th August 19748.p.mThe Exercise of Authority in the ChurchI. Introduction

'Behold I am with you all days, even to the end of the world.'

'When the Spirit comes he will lead you into all truth .

1. The Christian is called to respond in faith to the risen Lord's command to follow him. But how shall he know what it is to be an authentic witness to the risen Lord? How shall he know what is authentic Christianity?
2. Christ promised that after his resurrection he would send his Spirit to dwell with us and lead us into all truth. The Spirit is present in the community of believers, called to witness to his resurrection and to preach the gospel to all men until he comes again.
3. In sacramental initiation the Spirit sanctifies the Christian and incorporates him into the community of believers. The same Spirit has guided that community in recording its witness to Christ in the New Testament. To be authentically Christian demands assent to that witness.
4. In the eucharist, where the word of God is proclaimed and the paschal mystery is celebrated, the Spirit moves the believer to understand more fully the gospel message and effects Christ's sacramental presence to and for the community.

II. Church: Community of Faith

5. Formed by hearing the word of God and nourished by the sacramental body and blood of Christ, the baptized Christian matures as a member of the community of believers. This community is the church, an inexhaustible mystery (mysterion) of the risen Lord's presence among men to carry out the design of the Holy Trinity to restore and redeem all the world.

6. The New Testament uses a variety of images to describe the Church, but one characteristic predominates: the church is a community of faith which, worshipping God in Christ, confesses what Jesus taught and did.
7. The early Christian communities confessed their faith in kerygma, song and liturgy, which formed the basis for much of the New Testament writings. In response to a variety of pressures, by the early second century, local Christian communities had composed creeds which candidates for baptism would confess prior to their admission to the Christian community. The scriptures and the early baptismal creeds were prime sources from which the councils of the fourth and fifth centuries composed the creeds which were recited at the eucharistic liturgy as a confession of faith of the believing community.
8. In the early church the office of teaching was not confined to ordained ministers. But the centrifugal forces of heretical sects gradually led the Christian community to associate the function of teaching more and more with the oversight (episkope) of the ordained ministry, and especially with the office of the bishop. Moreover, each local church, independent in itself, also knew itself to be a part of the universal church, so that in questions of discipline and order, or the date of Easter, or the limits of the New Testament canon, each bishop needed to be one with all other bishops in the ecclesia catholica, just as he knew himself to be one with them in faith. Conflict with Gnosticism, with its claims to possess esoteric theosophical traditions, brought the church to lay great emphasis upon the succession of authorized teachers in the churches of apostolic foundation. Irenaeus explains that, while the true faith has been preserved in all such churches, a special place is occupied by the Christian community at Rome, able to look back to the martyrdom of the apostles Peter and Paul. (Irenaeus knew that no single church had played so outstanding a role in establishing the concept of orthodoxy as the community in Rome.)

9. But the judgments of the bishops of the great sees were not autocratic, and as a means of reaching consensus episcopal councils (which might be ~~attended~~by others besides bishops) came to be held, soon more or less regularly. For example, in the aftermath of persecution, bishops needed to reach a common mind on the appropriate form of discipline for the different categories among those who had lapsed and who wished for restoration. Essential questions of doctrine came from time to time before church councils, but Gnosticism, the greatest danger of all, was met by sustained theological argument, not by authoritative definitions issued by councils or bishops of great sees. From the Council of Nicaea onwards central questions of fundamental doctrine within the church came for decision to assemblies of bishops with more than local representation. Whatever human weaknesses are apparent in the history of the great councils of the ancient church, their decisions on the doctrine of God and of the person of Christ are received as a permanent achievement.

10. Accordingly, as a community of faith the church proclaims the message and deeds of Jesus as expressed in the New Testament, confessed in the creeds and professed by the councils.

III. The Spirit: The Realization of Christ's Promise
to His Church.

11. The creeds and the professions of faith of the early councils of the undivided church possess authority because they are the fruit of the Holy Spirit's guiding presence in the church. They safeguard and affirm the authentic faith, without which the church cannot be the church.

12. The christological and trinitarian formulations of the great councils, which emerged from deep controversy, were an elucidation and enrichment of the church's understanding of the revelation once for all given to the saints. In these affirmations and in the process by which they were

received by the faithful we discern the fulfilment of Christ's promise of the enduring presence of his Spirit in his church. The church has a God-given ability to respond to the spirit of truth dwelling within her, in articulating her understanding of revelation, and on that ground knows in faith that her profession of faith - that is, her meaning in her restatement of revelation - will not lead her into error.

3. Despite the human sinfulness in the church and her frequent failures to respond fully to the Spirit, the church today still proclaims the message of the New Testament, confessed in the creeds and professed by the early councils. There is an identity in faith between the writers of the New Testament and Christians of a later age. Just as the great councils of antiquity found themselves unable to preserve that identity merely by repeating biblical texts, so also Christians of today cannot speak the word of God to their time merely by repeating the formulas of either the apostolic age or the first general councils; but this does not mean that, in the task of making central affirmations today, Christians will or can wish to begin ex novo, as if the canon of scripture or the canonical definitions did not exist. Because the Spirit acts in the church and Christ is present in her, we believe that the church of today has received, lives by, and will faithfully transmit the life and truth of her risen Lord.