


Permanence in the Truth

A. In the purpose of God the Church is to remain the true community of Christ to the end, 'till he come'. In the vicissitudes of history, because of the sinful failures of its members to respond to the Spirit, corruption is an ever-present threat, so that the Church is constantly called to penitence and reform under the word of God mediated through the community's sacred norms, especially Holy Scripture. History shows how not only individuals but whole sections of the People of God can be drawn into error (cf. Tillard, Sensus Fidelium, p.8). In faith therefore we affirm Christ's promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail against his Church. The gifts and calling of God are not subject to changes of mind on God's part. Therefore, despite the failings of those to whom the Gospel is entrusted, the Spirit ensures that the Church will never cease to be the sign of salvation on earth.

B. The confidence, based on Christ's promise, that the Church will not fail does not mean that in Church History only triumphs are to be discerned; nor that it is only even primarily in great moments of solemn dogmatic definition that we are to see the Spirit's guiding hand at work. The Christian life is greater than a set of theological doctrines. Nevertheless there have been, and may in the future be, situations where a question of such magnitude is asked that the Church's chief pastors have a duty, in interaction with the general mind of



of the faithful, to give an answer. In giving a definition the Church's pastors do not play a creative role in adding to the sum of revealed truth, but their task nevertheless requires a charism of discernment that only the Spirit can confer. And the reception of the definition by the faithful is likewise a gift of spiritual discernment.

It has been suggested earlier in our discussions that "in the age of the Fathers, the Roman primacy, exercised as a primacy of responsibility and service played a providential role in the Church's life (cf. supra, para. 8) and that it may be called to play a similar role in the new and critical situation of our own time and indeed of the future". (Venice II, para 11,b) This was seen as in line with the thought of the Lambeth Conference of 1968: "we recognise the papacy as a historic reality whose developing role requires deep reflection and joint study by all concerned for the unity of the body of Christ".

Some of this reflection and joint study led us to say in another Venice document under the heading of "The Anglican View of Koinonia and Authority in the Church", "from an Anglican standpoint the papal office could serve in a united Church, at the very least, as a most valuable sign of the visible unity of Christ's Church. But it could also be much more than this. In the Anglican tradition, the notion of comprehensiveness (of unity and diversity, or diversity within unity) is especially cherished. But there would be a far more practical guarantee for comprehensiveness in an age of theological pluralism if in the Church's life and structure there were a visible focus not only of unity but also of final authority. Such a focal point could protect legitimate and enriching diversity from the tyranny of sectarianism. It could even be argued that only given such a safeguard can one take diversity as seriously as it must be taken in any Church which claims true Catholicity. One can see that the papal office, understood in this way (at least as a beginning) could well aid the fulfilment of one of the central convictions and hopes which make Anglicanism what it is." (Venice III, para 14)