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"The Spirit's abiding in the Church"

(From the Archbishop of Dublin)— *M. Adoo*

Father Ryan and I were assigned the task of producing material on the subject of the Spirit's abiding in the Church and how this relates to concepts of the indefectibility and infallibility of the Church in both our communions.

The foregoing article on "Anglicanism and the nature and exercise of Authority in the Church" (New Divinity, Winter 1976) has been seen by Father Ryan who considers that "it provides a very solid basis" (in his own words) for working on the problem. He has commented that "the main difficulty" is indicated on p.88: "It is a concept of the nature and exercise of authority which, while fully capable of acting on behalf of the whole Church in matters of doctrine, sacraments and discipline, nevertheless leans to an emphasis on process rather than on the juridical. One suspects that what undergirds this is a deeply-rooted Anglican conviction that the Spirit's guidance is not irresistible and that the Church in history has not at all times been perfectly responsive to her infallible Guide (cp. Article XIX.) As E.J. Bicknell pointed out long ago, what was promised to the Church was not infallibility but an infallible guide, the Holy Spirit."

We think that, as the article gives a fair picture of the way Anglicans believe the Holy Spirit to be at work in transmitting the truth of the Gospel, it might be useful to include it as part of the material bearing directly on our subject.

The following addendum is intended to develop specifically certain aspects of this in relation to the subject set to us.

The Spirit's abiding in the Church has two aspects, or two areas of effect: firstly, the leading of the community of faith into the truth of the Gospel and maintaining it in that truth, and secondly, the inspiring and informing of the community of faith so that the members
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are called to the life of faith, helped to maintain the characteristics of this life, and strengthened therein by the Spirit through the Word and Sacraments and all uncovenanted as well as covenanted gifts of the Spirit. Belief and behaviour are inseparable in the truth of the Gospel and so this is the total area in which the effects of the Spirit's abiding in the Church are felt: "As he taught you, then, dwell in him." (1 John 2 : 27)

However, for the purpose of this paper, one must artificially separate belief as it is chiefly in this connection that the questions concerning indefectibility/infallibility arise.

Whether it is due to the inaccuracies of language or to a disinclination to think through to its meaning the implications of the language used, I find a tendency to speak of the Church's "authority in controversies of faith" (Article XX) as if it were something quite distinct from the guiding authority of the Spirit in the Church. Where this distinction is tacitly assumed or unconsciously taken for granted it can become a fruitful source of confusion. It seems to me therefore worth insisting that, in the final analysis, the authority which the Church exercises in formulating the truths of faith is none other than the Spirit's authority leading the community of faith into the truth and evoking man's response to the truth of the Gospel: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." (Acts 15 : 28.) I would accept George Tavard's comment: "What is then left of the notion of infallibility can be scarcely more than trust in the Spirit's protection and guidance of the Church's faith and of the organs which formulate this faith. The Spirit may be said to be infallible in that he infallibly reaches his goals, and we trust him to guide the Church." (1

This, as I understand it, is in effect a description of the Church's indefectibility.

(1 "Is the Papacy an Object of Faith?" (One in Christ Vol. XIII, No. 3 1977, P.228)

It is worth comparing these points, (and the article's assessment of the Anglican estimate of the nature and function of authority in the Church,) with the Venice Statement on Authority in the Church. What has VS to say about the Spirit's abiding in the Church?

In the first place, (2) makes it clear that fundamentally the authority of the Church is the Spirit's authority leading the apostolic community to recognise and to proclaim the Gospel. The transmission of the Gospel is "assisted by the Holy Spirit" and the documents recording the life and words of Jesus are normative for faith and convey the authority of the Word of God. Furthermore, "entrusted with these documents, the Christian community is enabled by the Holy Spirit to live out the Gospel and so to be led into all truth." The two areas of the Spirit's work, that of authentic faith and authentic life are thus the one sphere of the Spirit's abiding in the Church. At the same time, the unbreakable link between this and the use of the Scriptural criterion from the human side of the community's assessment of its faith and life is asserted. In (3) this is further developed, and the Spirit of the risen Lord is seen as indwelling the Church, safeguarding its faithfulness and equipping it for mission in and to human society. It is "by sharing in the life of the Spirit" that the members of the apostolic community find the means of being faithful to the Christian revelation and the grace which enables response. "Special gifts for the benefit of the Church" are from the Holy Spirit and among them is the episcopate of the ordained ministry. (5) The following paragraphs (6) and (7) depict the community's life in terms of a "continuing process of discernment and response" in which the Holy Spirit is continuously at work keeping the community in the faith and evoking and enabling the authentic life of faith in its members. This ceaseless work of the Spirit abiding in the Church is the basis for the conviction that the Church cannot in the last resort cease to be itself, to be Christian: "It is by such means as these that
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the Holy Spirit keeps the Church under the lordship of Christ, who, taking full account of human weakness, has promised never to abandon his people." Together with this assertion that the Church cannot "fail," because of the promise, is coupled a statement of ecclesia semper reformanda because of the inadequacies of the human instruments of authority in the Church. VS, in (15) and (16), reiterates the Scriptural criterion as being that with which all councils of the Church must be consonant as they state the faith, for the use of this criterion is intimately bound up with the Spirit's guidance of the Church and indeed with the whole concept of councils, "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"(Acts 15 : 28.) This is enlarged upon in (16) where the importance of establishing criteria, of the subject matter of definitions and of the process of reception as these, together with the response of the faithful, are seen in terms of a process "through the Spirit's continuing guidance of the whole Church." In (18) VS returns to this, emphasising how, in order to prevent "distortion of the Gospel," the Church appeals to Scripture and antiquity (the creeds, writings and councils of the Early Church,) and the statement refers to episcopal responsibility "for promoting truth and discerning error," noting that "the interaction of bishop and people in its exercise is a safeguard of Christian life and fidelity." A footnote draws attention to the exposition of this appeal to Scripture and the primitive Church by successive Lambeth Conferences in 1948 and 1968.

The same paragraph (18) stresses that neither bishop nor people are invariably protected from errors and it concludes by explaining what is meant by the Church's indefectibility : "Yet, in Christian hope, we are confident that such failures cannot destroy the Church's ability to proclaim the Gospel and to show forth the Christian life; for we believe that Christ will not desert his Church and that the Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth. That is why the Church, in spite of its failures, can be described as indefectible."

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VS then goes on to conciliar and pramatial authority (19 - 25) and in this section, important for our subject, two things are made clear:

- (a) that the Church's judgemental process in matters of faith is "through the Holy Spirit."
- (b) that the guidance of the Spirit in matters of the truths of faith is inseparable from the use of the criteria on the part of the human instruments and authorities in the Church.

The references in (19) to the Spirit's abiding in the Church should be carefully noted as should the insistence on the criterions and the way in which both are linked. The Holy Spirit guides the Church to accept as protected from error only those judgements of General Councils which "do not add to the truth" and which are "consonant with Scripture," "faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition" and which are "decisions on fundamental matters of faith" or "which formulate the central truths of salvation."

This is very far from making a blanket assertion, as some Anglican critics have suggested, that General Councils cannot err. (We know that Arimirus and Saleucia erred.) In fact, para.19 may be compared with Article XXI which says that General Councils "may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scriptures."

In other words, both documents are saying much the same thing, one from a more positive and the other from a more negative angle. Both are saying that, through and by the Holy Spirit, Councils are controlled in their judgements on fundamental matters of faith by the criterion of Holy Scripture (which per se cannot lead the Church into error.)

One would imagine from some of the comments that Anglicans insist that General Councils must err or that all General Councils have erred! Archbishop Laud's remarks on this matter (in his Conference with Fisher) represent a typical Anglican statement and his relating of conciliar judgements to the guidance of the Spirit and to the Scriptural criterion in the context of the Church's indefectibility should be compared with VS and the foregoing assessment of authority in the Anglican Communion 1)

Laud's contention is that "there is no power in the Council, no assistance to it, but what is in and to the Church." A General Council is "a representing body" and "therefore the acts, laws and decrees of the representative, be it ecclesiastical or civil, are binding in their strength; but they are not so certain, and free from error, as is that wisdom which resides in the whole." Nothing "less than the assistance of the Holy Ghost" can secure a Council against error. Laud continues "That the assistance of the Holy Ghost is without error. That is no question; and as little there is, that a council hath it. But the doubt that troubles is, Whether all assistance of the Holy Ghost be afforded in such a high manner as to cause all the definitions of a Council in matters fundamental in the Faith, and in remote deductions from it, to be alike infallible?"

He examines this and concludes that it is so only in "all truth absolutely necessary to salvation, and this, when they suffer themselves to be led by the Blessed Spirit, by the Word of God; and all truth which Christ had before, at least fundamentally, declared unto them." The phrasing may be compared with VS (19) and in particular with the Venice phrase "This binding authority does not belong to every Conciliar decree, but only to those which formulate the central truths of salvation." Identical?

Laud and the Venice Statement are saying the same things as does Article XXI about General Councils. He returns again to this, connecting it with the Spirit's abiding in the Church and the linked Scriptural criterion (the chief theme of this addendum) and writing "all necessary to salvation;"

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1) A Relation of the Conference (1639) Sect. XXXIII.

in which I shall easily grant a General Council cannot err, suffering itself to be led by this Spirit of Truth in the Scripture, and not taking upon it to lead both the Scripture and the Spirit.' 1)

Section V of VS concludes with a description of primacy's function in respect of the Church's permanence in the truth. VS (20) places primacy firmly in the setting of collegiality and the claims made for a General Council are not advanced on behalf of primate, and the Statement simply says "Primal statements are only one way (italics not in text) by which the Holy Spirit keeps the people of God faithful to the truth of the Gospel."

In my view, there is no serious difference between the Venice Statement up to this point, and the Anglican view of how the Spirit abides in the Church and keeps it in the truth of the Gospel. So far, VS is an agreed statement and the sentence just quoted should be put alongside VS (26), with its reference to the Malta Report's concept of "unity by stages" and its own closing phrase: "Accordingly, we submit our Statements (note the plural) to our respective authorities to consider whether or not they are judged to express on these central subjects a unity at the level of faith which not only justifies but requires action to bring about a closer sharing between our two communions in life, worship and mission." With this should be linked the opinion recorded in the Co-Chairmen's preface to the Venice Statement "that our degree of agreement .. argues for greater communion between our Churches."

What is the point reached in the dialogue on the nature, purpose and function of authority in the Church?

- 1) "It seems," writes Laud, "it was no news with St. Augustine, that a General Council might err" and he discusses St. Augustine's differentiation between "the rules of Scripture and the definitions of men," including Councils.

If both partners to the discussion have the same objective, i.e., to preserve the Church in the truth of the Gospel, then they must (if they are thinking in terms of movement) be ready to ask themselves if their different instrumentalities for ensuring this are such as to be necessarily barriers to unity or to a degree of closer sharing or fuller fellowship.

Implied in this assessment is the need to test our ecclesiology against the Church as it was from the beginning and to be aware of the existence of other (and earlier) models of the organs and instruments of authority. Perhaps it is not altogether naive to ponder how the Church was maintained in the truth before Pastor Aeternus was decreed and before the Church of Ireland set up synodical government - significantly both things happened in the same year! (1)

Apart altogether from the theological and ecclesiological aspects of the way in which the Spirit maintains the Church in the truth, which we have been discussing, Anglicans (and Orthodox) looking at history do not see that there is a need for papal infallibility in this process. Indeed in this connection history cannot ignore Liberius, Zosimus, Vigilus, Honorius and Eugenius. This has been reinforced by the promulgation of the Marian dogmas, and the difficulty of reconciling these with the wording of the 1870 decree 2) has if anything added to the anxiety about ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae irreformabiles. It is probably fair to say that what causes uneasiness here is the Anglican conviction that truth authenticates authority and that this is part of the understanding of how the Church is led by the Blessed Spirit and by the word of God (to quote Laud)

(1) Cp. H. Chadwick's paper "Some Reflections on Magisterium in the Early Church" (Mélanges Cóngrar (1974), pp.163 -75)

(2) "Neque enim Petri successoribus Spiritus Sanctus promissus est, ut eo revelante novam doctrinam ~~mut~~efacerent, sed ut, eo assistente, traditam per Apostolos revelationem sui fidei depositum sancte custodirent et fideliter exponerent."

George Tavard wrote (One in Christ 1977, no.3) of his conclusion that "The papacy is an object of faith neither in its primacy nor in regard to the Pope's jurisdiction or in regard to papal infallibility. In the Roman Catholic Communion, the papacy belongs among the elements of the Church's structure that have a restraining function in regard to the guardianship and the teaching of the faith. Thus it is an object of trust, but the trust is not in the papacy of the pope, it is in the Holy Spirit."

The subject set us was the Spirit's abiding in the Church and the impact of this on the indefectibility/infallibility of the Church. Whether one accepts Tavard's view or not, it remains a warning to remember that authority in the Church is ultimately the authority of the Spirit guiding the people of God and maintaining them in the truth. If this is not central to our thinking, there is danger of an all too human, localised and even juridical view of authority in the Church and of its function in what is, after all, the Spirit-filled community.

Where does the Roman Catholic assertion of papal infallibility in 1870 and Anglican rejection of it, as by Lambeth 1968, leave the dialogue? If, as seems probable, Anglicans and Roman Catholics are unlikely to achieve a verbal agreement on infallibility acceptable to both Churches, is a doctrinal pluralism on the meaning of the papal office (a teaching after all peculiar to the Roman Catholic Church) something which can be encompassed within the legitimate limits of diversity in a united Church?

Yarnold and Chadwick in their commentary on the Venice Statement (Truth and Authority 1977 - note the title) wrote: "The Roman Catholic tradition has seen the Bishop of Rome as possessing by God's will a unique function in the Episcopal College, taking different forms at different times in history, but possessing the duty and the right to invite the following of all the faithful, and therefore being also the focus of teaching authority with a safeguarding power of definition in matters structural to Christian faith and ethics. This Roman Catholic tradition can be presented in brief and perhaps oversimplified terms as a belief that the Son of God founded His Church on Peter and the Apostles, that the Pope and bishops are /to

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to the end of time the juridical inheritors of the powers the Lord entrusted to his Church on earth ; and that these powers include not only ~~primatial~~ leadership but also a prophetic teaching office (commonly called "infallibility") inherent in Christ's promise to be with his Church always.

The Anglican tradition has regarded this doctrine of authority in the Church as one-sided and as needing to be qualified by (a) appeal to the sources of apostolic faith and life in the scriptures, (b) the ancient catholic tradition, especially as enshrined in the decisions of the ecumenical councils of the undivided Church, (c) reason. Accordingly, the Anglican tradition has seen the problem of authority in the Church in terms of a need to preserve a balance between several elements, and has therefore felt that a true and proper understanding of truth and teaching authority in the Church is unlikely to be found centred upon one particular bishop, whose judgement can at times be coloured by his background and national culture and who, because of this concentration of authority in a single person, can escape the checks and balances provided by other norms of authority."

Anglicans would hold, with Archbishop Wake, that "the chair of Peter is preserved in all Catholic Churches," a view already expressed in the third century by St. Cyprian of Carthage. Roman Catholics would hold that it is to be identified with the See of Rome. One side may regard the other's view of the Spirit's guidance and abiding in the Church as far too localised and particularised. The other may regard the view of the first as too diffused and lacking a point of application. But the question is, should these two understandings of how the Spirit keeps the Church faithful to the Gospel allow themselves to be polarised to the extent that each side misses the real point, that the other is concerned with and striving to ensure that the truth of the Gospel is faithfully transmitted so that the Church remains in that truth?

Given the large area of full agreement, outlined in the Malta Report ((3), (7) and cp.(4),) and given the Windsor and Canterbury Agreed Statements,

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the proper context for an assessment is that provided by the concept of "sister - churches." This was elaborated by Cardinal Willebrands in 1970, at a service in Great St. Mary's, Cambridge and in the same year, on 25th October, at the canonisation of the Forty Martyrs, Pope Paul VI referred to the Anglican Church as an "ever beloved sister" of the Church of Rome. There is no reason to take this as the language of ecclesiastical hyperbole since the Pope explicitated the phrase : "There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and the worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Catholic Church - this humble 'servant of the servants of God' - is able to embrace her ever-beloved sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ : a communion of origin and faith, a communion of priesthood and of rule, a communion of the Saints in the freedom of love and of the Spirit of Jesus."

It will be recalled that this particular vocabulary of ecumenism had been developing before this between Rome and Orthodoxy. The letter Anno ineunte of Pope Paul VI to the Patriarch Athenagoras I on 15 July 1976 had made use of the term "sister Churches" and explained its context. In 1971, the Pope declared that "between our Church and the venerable Orthodox Churches there already exists an almost total, though it be not yet perfect, communion." In the following year, the Pope affirmed "We are in almost complete communion with the Orthodox Churches." It is clearly relevant that the latter do not accept papal primacy as expressed since 1870, or papal infallibility, for as J. Meyendorff has said "The question of authority has stood for centuries in the very centre of the issues between East and West." 1) Yet Vatican II has permitted a limited communicatio in sacris between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

1) In "A Pope for all Christians" 1976, ed. Peter J. McCord, P.142

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It is at this point that, in the context of the concept of sister churches, the Malta Report's concept of unity by stages needs to be remembered. It is a realistic concept, building as it does upon the existing measures of full agreement, of substantial agreement, and of convergence. Instead of an all-or-nothing approach, it says that growth together upon this basis and under the leading of the Spirit is a real possibility and could open up further possibilities through degrees of shared life which could never emerge from paper agreements or union plans which seek to prescribe everything beforehand.

If Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree, as in the Venice Statement that the purpose of authority in the Church is to maintain the Church in the truth, but if the two communions differ in the methods by which they seek to achieve this purpose, must this preclude a stage of closer fellowship? Or does the degree of agreement outlined in VS argue for "greater communion between our churches?" Is such a new stage in the inter-church relationship not possible on the basis of the extensive agreement so far achieved and on the analogy of the Rome-Orthodoxy situation, without Roman Catholics giving up the doctrine of papal infallibility or Anglicans accepting it?

VS looked forward in (22) and (25) to a future union in which the primatial and conciliar aspects of episcopate would come to be complementary. Can this ever begin to come about outside a living situation of growth in a new relationship of sister-churches living and learning together? Was Karl Rahner prophesying to us when he said that the only and right way out of the present ecumenical stagnation was to reverse the process and proceed in the opposite direction: "Could we not consider full unity of faith and theology as a consequence of institutional unification, particularly since the latter need not mean institutional uniformity based on dogma as hitherto envisaged by the Code of Canon Law?" (1) He considers that the theologians /have

(1) The Shape of the Church to Come (English ed. 1974,) pp 104 - 7

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conclusion

have more or less done their work and that it is now over to the office-holders. In this, and in what he has to say about a "Petrine ministry" in a re-united Church, Rahner is speaking to the present situation. Is the Malta Report not doing the same thing? Is it only in a measure of shared life that unity will grow, and bear fruit unexpected and unforeseen by all of us?

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