

UNIVERSAL PRIMACY: AN ANGLICAN STATEMENT

Authority in the Church in all its forms exists for the maintenance of truth and the promotion of unity. It is exercised simultaneously at various levels and in different ways.

The local church consisting of a number of Christian communities is bound together both by episcopal oversight and by the representation of these communities in diocesan councils and synods.

Similarly provincial synods together with an archbishop's oversight, and general synods with a primate's oversight, are instruments through which authority is exercised in the Anglican Communion.

In theory, if not always in practice, this synodical pattern is designed to ensure full lay participation.

Within this synodical structure there is a special episcopate corporately shared by all the bishops (collegiality) who exercise some of the functions of oversight originally entrusted to the first apostles. This demonstrates the Anglican conviction that authority has many strands and cannot be confined to any single pattern (see Lambeth Conferences 1948, 1968).

The concept of primacy is common to both our churches, but the Roman Catholic Church alone recognises a primate who is universal. It is the claims made for this universal primacy and its exercise which are unacceptable to us.

Nevertheless such problems as the ordination of women and the limitations of the Lambeth Conferences make us increasingly aware

of the need for a central authority. Such an authority would need to be conciliar and require a president whose primacy would be recognised throughout the Anglican Communion. Anglicans would insist that his authority must always be exercised in a conciliar context. Our experience as Anglicans and our concern for unity may well indicate that a universal primacy is now God's will for his Church.

We do not, however, believe universal primacy to be so divinely ordered as to be essential to the very existence of the Church. It is our conviction that the Anglican pattern of authority evolved over the past 400 years, although it has hitherto lacked a universal primacy, has proved at least equally effective in maintaining truth and promoting unity.

The jurisdiction hitherto accorded to the Bishop of Rome is unacceptable to Anglicans since in practice (if not in theory) it overrides authority properly inherent in councils, synods and the College of Bishops.

On infallibility we concur with the Statement of the Anglican/Orthodox Conversations para. 17: "Both Anglicans and Orthodox agree that infallibility is not the property of any particular institution or person in the Church, but that the promises of Christ are made to the whole Church."

We believe that the interpretation of the Petrine Texts has been so concentrated on Peter as to obscure the fact that the ministry of oversight was shared by the other Apostles and notably by St.

Paul. Nor is it apparent that any commission given to Peter was to be transmitted to any successor. The present unreality of an individual succession is further exemplified by the relationship of the Bishop of Rome to the Curia. It seems to us that the effective working of conciliarity and collegiality is obstructed by curial power and influence.

Two Questions to the Roman Catholic Church

1. Can we be assured that a church which cannot accept the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome as iure divino will not be regarded as less than fully a church?
  
2. Would acceptance of the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome necessarily involve acceptance as de fide of the specifically Roman Catholic dogmas such as those relating to Mary?