

3rd December 1980

Dear Christopher,

Thanks for the copies of the Knapp-Fisher-Yarnold drafts; a great help to us there. I have been reflecting a little on our present drafts and have some queries that gnaw away.

1. Do our present ARCIC drafts do justice to a polarity in the contrasting ways in which the Church's continuity with the people of God of the Bible has been understood? In the radical Protestant tradition (prior to the sixteenth century it may be found in some Catholic writers too) the Church as people of God has been seen as in continuity not so much with the apostolic community on whom the Lord breathed out the Spirit and to whom he entrusted the power of the keys, as with the Old Testament Hebrews. They were subject to continual calls to reformation by the prophets because of their extraordinary genius not for truth and morality but for apostasy, going awhoring after curious gods or golden calves, continually needing to be recalled through inspired prophets to submit obediently to the word of the Lord. Since the 16th century the Catholic West has felt itself so threatened by 'enemies' like Luther or Cranmer that all the stress has been on confidence in the Church as the undiminished continuation of Christ's incarnate work on earth; on the Holy Spirit preserving the Church of justified sinners now in process of sanctification through the means of grace, preventing it from irremediable error at times of strong controversy; on the Lord's promises that the gates of hell shall not prevail; that he is with his people in their mission to the end of time, with the Spirit guiding into all truth and with Mary as embodiment and model of this ideal Church, without spot or blemish, which is made actual in sanctity in so far as it is assimilated to the holiness, obedience, and faith that she supremely represents in the creaturely order.

2. Our present drafts still seem to fail in clarifying boggy-words like indefectibility and infallibility; i.e. we are still tending to write without much sensitivity to people who fondly imagine indefectibility to mean 'free of defect' and who take infallibility to mean that whatever organ possesses this charism (Bible or universal Church or universal primate - in or out of synod)

possesses absolute truth in an absolute degree. On the Anglican side we should hope to have a number of readers who may not much want to listen to ARCIC, but who may very well listen in astonished gratitude if we can get this clear for them. We have somehow not brought out in lapidary terms that the central point at issue we see to be whether or not one has reason to trust the church, as the redeemed people of God, to be reliable and worthy of confidence in its witness to the gospel, because protected by the Spirit.

3. Indefectibility is not actually a word that glorifies the Church's splendid possession of triumphant truth, but directs attention to its continual need to purify itself under the word of God, because it carries a constant implication of admitting the church's weakness, over which the Spirit's disciplining, correcting hand triumphs to prevent the establishment of error such that the truth of redemption is lost.

4. (A point suggested by reading the 2nd para. of A in the Knapp-Fisher/Yarnold draft). Would it be correct to say explicitly: Roman Catholic theologians have moved decisively away from the older notion that infallibility is a privilege so uniquely attaching to the office of the Pope that truth is ensured in the Church in so far as it obediently receives authoritative guidance from Rome. Since Vatican II, the source of objective confidence is found first in the universal faith of all the people of God, articulated and guided indeed by a teaching office and authority which has its focus in the see of Rome (in or out of synod?), but that authority is nevertheless secondary to the other. (Anglicans would of course agree deeply with those Roman Catholics who are distressed that e.g. the Roman synod of bishops is deemed merely advisory to the Pope in whom all true authority resides, and would think that this points to an undigested inconsistency.)

5. From the Anglican side I wonder if we could not concede that our synodical ideals are in practice seldom free of difficulties, in part for lack of a strong centre of gravity. The generalisation may be ventured that all assemblies of numerous high-minded peopl

are vulnerable to faction, and are hard to hold together on course. I do not mean that in the light of church history the Roman Catholic church has enjoyed a much happier history with councils than we have had, for there is much evidence to show how painful synods can be in times of controversy; and indeed there is probably fearful inherent danger in gathering together large assemblies of bishops e.g. at Lambeth Conferences when strong feelings may lead them to endorse positions that cooler deliberation would have treated more calmly. Rome has had its troubles with synods too. And yet they are a concrete realisation of something of the koinonia which is intensely felt by participants and is looked to by the faithful, and they need a president.

6. Hope (though battered by some rough rides at Venice) remains a spark within me that we can agree that the Church has authority in controversies of faith; that Anglicans too believe and trust in the holy catholic church as the holy people to whom the truth of the gospel is entrusted and with whom we may be sure of finding the word of God and the true sacraments; that we also believe it to be Christ's will for his Church that within its structure of ministry and pastoral care there should be guiding, even defining authority (defining, in the sense of being able to say Here, not there, This and not that); that councils need a president of undisputed authority to make them work if the matters on the agenda are fundamental to the being of the Church; above all, that we also think it possible to regard a question as 'settled' e.g. by Nicaea, i.e. that such decisions are no longer wholly open, any more than the course of a river is free to retrace its path and to go the other side of some great mass of rock, and that, although the reception by the people of God does not first confer authority on a definition, the final knowledge that a definition has settled a question and is what it purports to be comes when Christians are led by the Spirit to appropriate it so that it is accepted by the Church at large in a kind of moral unanimity.

7. I hope we shall not say we are agreed about Infallibility tout court, not because I know we are not, but because no one of our

readers will find that comprehensible. We ought to be able to agree that, in the universal church, there is a pastoral need for authority able to give judgement on a matter of fundamental faith or morals; that we believe this to be God's intention for his people; and that the judgement may be articulated and promulgated to the faithful normally through synodical decision, i.e. (in a crucial matter) by the universal primate in Council, but in special circumstances by the universal primate acting, after due consultation, without necessarily having called a synod (which is not in all circumstances, as Article XXI observes, possible for political or other reasons). In that event, we may affirm that for believers this authority will be assisted by the Spirit and protected from leading the church into irremediable error, for it inheres in the concept of the indefectibility granted to the church, in the faithfulness of God, that the Church will not be irrevocably committed to error in an essential matter of the faith. Anglicans will not want to call this 'infallibility' because for them this normally means possessing absolute truth in an absolute degree, but if Roman Catholics wish to use the word 'infallibility' to cover the sense expressed above, our disagreement is purely a matter of words, not of things. A more fundamental qualification to add seems to me that Anglicans set store by the process of reception by the faithful in a way that does not always find immediate expression in Roman Catholic theology, but I do not think we are actually disagreed on this question. Scratch any Roman Catholic church historian and I think you will find his account of reception of definitions to correspond to what Anglicans affirm to be the case; i.e. there is some element of retrospective judgement in the formulation of orthodoxy.

Yours ever,

(Signed) HENRY CHADWICK