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ARCIC 237/Authority Elucidation/3

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH: AN ELUCIDATION

2. Comments and Criticisms

After the publication of the Venice Statement on Authority in the Church the Commission received comments and criticisms, (among which it judges the following to be of special concern.)

Questions have been raised about the Commission's use of the term koinonia. It has been suggested that the treatment of the place and authority of the laity in the Church is inadequate. There have also been requests for a clarification of the nature of Christian authority, of jurisdiction and of the statement that the bishop 'can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity'.

Underlying many reactions to the Venice Statement is a degree of uneasiness as to whether insufficient attention is paid to the primary authority of Scripture, with the result that certain historical developments are given an authority comparable to that of Scripture.

There have been further questions concerning the normative nature of history in relation to doctrine. For example, a recurring question has been whether the Commission is suggesting that a universal primacy is a theological necessity simply because one has existed or been claimed. Again it has been asked whether belief in the 'indefectibility' of the Church and 'doctrinal development' implies an automatic ratification of the past.

There has been a request for a clearer definition of 'indefectibility' and 'infallibility', and for a more exact distinction to be drawn between them.

It has been asked whether the criteria for deciding if a council is ecumenical include the subsequent reception by the Church as a whole. Some commentators have claimed that what the Statement says about the protection of an ecumenical council from error is in conflict with Article XXI of the Anglican Thirty Nine Articles of Religion.

Some questions have been asked about the status of regional primacies - for example, the patriarchal office as exercised in the Eastern Churches, and the office of metropolitan in the West.

In what follows the Commission attempts to address itself to these problems and to elucidate the Venice Statement as it bears on each of them. In seeking to answer the criticisms that have been received we have sometimes thought it necessary to go further and to elucidate the basic issues that underlie them. In all that we say we take for granted two fundamental principles - that Christian faith depends on divine revelation and that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in the communication of revealed truth.

2. Koinonia

Critics of the Venice document maintain that there is too much stress upon the external manifestation of koinonia.

The spiritual aspect of koinonia has never been a matter of disagreement between our two communions. Yet the Church as koinonia is not only the inner reality of the union of all Christians with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, but also its visible expression. This needs to be realised by a common faith, mutual love and a shared sacramental life.

3. The Place of the Laity

The Commission has been accused of an over-emphasis upon the ordained ministry to the neglect of the laity.

In guarding and developing communion, every member has a part to play. Baptism gives everyone in the Church the right, and consequently the ability, to carry out his particular function in the body. The recognition of this fundamental right is of great importance. In different ways, even if sometimes hesitantly, our two churches have sought to integrate in decision making those who are not ordained. But some critics maintain that the problem lies in the restriction of this function to mere consultation.

The reason why the Venice Statement spoke at length about the structure of ministerial authority was that this was the area where most difficulties appeared to exist. There was no de-valuing of the proper and active role of the laity. For instance, we said that the Holy Spirit gives to some individuals and communities special gifts for the benefit of the Church (para. 5), that all the members of the Church share in the discovery of God's will (para. 6), that the sensus fidelium is a vital element in the comprehension of God's truth (para. 18), and that all bear witness to God's compassion for mankind and his concern for justice in the world (Canterbury 7).

4. Hierarchical Authority

We have been asked to clarify the meaning of what some of our critics call 'hierarchical authority' - an expression we avoided. Here we are dealing with a form of authority which is inherent in the visible structure of the Church. By this we mean the authority

attached to those who exercise episcopate in the Church. The Holy Spirit gives to each person power to fulfil his particular function within the Body of Christ. Accordingly, those exercising episcopate receive the grace appropriate to their calling; and those over whom it is exercised must recognize and accept their God-given authority.

Both Anglicans and Roman Catholics, however, have criticized the emphasis we placed on a bishop's authority in certain circumstances to require compliance.

The specific oversight of the ordained ministry is exercised and acknowledged when a minister preaches the Gospel, presides at the Eucharist and seeks as pastor to lead the community truly to discern God's Word and its relevance to their lives. When this responsibility laid upon a bishop (or other ordained minister under the direction of a bishop) requires him to declare a person to be in error in respect of doctrine or conduct, even to the point of excluding him from eucharistic communion, he is acting for the sake of the integrity of the community's faith and life. Both our communions have always recognized this need for disciplinary action on exceptional occasions as part of the authority given by Christ to his ministers, however difficult it may be in practice to take such action. This is what we meant by saying that the bishop "can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity in its daily life" (para. 5). At the same time the authority of the ordained minister is not held in isolation, but is shared with other ministers and the rest of the community. All the ministers, whatever their role in the Body of Christ, are involved in responsibility for preserving the integrity of the community.

5. Jurisdiction

Critics have asked for clarification on two matters. First, what do we mean by jurisdiction? We understand jurisdiction as the power necessary for the effective fulfilment of an office. Its exercise and limits are determined by what that office involves.

In both our communions we find dioceses comprising different parishes and groups of dioceses at the provincial, national or international level. All of these are under the oversight of a special episcopate exercised by ministers with a shared responsibility for the overall care of the Church. Every form of jurisdiction given to those exercising such an episcopate is to serve and strengthen both the koinonia in the community and that between different Christian communities.

Secondly it has been questioned whether we imply that jurisdiction attached to different levels of episcopate - even within the same order of ministry - is always to be exercised in a similar way. Critics give the example of the relation and possible conflict between metropolitans and local bishops. We believe that the problem is not basically that of jurisdiction but of the complementarity and harmonious working of these differing forms of episcopate in the one body of Christ. Jurisdiction, being the power necessary for the fulfilment of an office, varies according to the specific functions of each form of episcopate. That is why the use of this juridical vocabulary does not mean that we attribute to all those exercising episcopate at different levels exactly the same power. Thus for example the jurisdiction of a metropolitan in his province is not a heightened form of the power proper to a local bishop as if the latter were no more than an auxiliary: nor is it the exercise on

a broader field of precisely the same power as a local bishop possesses in his diocese: it is determined by the specific functions which he is required to discharge in relation to his fellow-bishops.

6. The Place of Scripture

Our documents have been criticized for failing to give an adequate account of the primary authority of Scripture in the Church, thereby making it possible for us to treat certain historical developments as possessing an authority comparable to that of Scripture itself. Our description of 'the inspired documents.... as a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith' (Venice, para. 2) has been felt to be an inadequate statement of the truth.

The basis of our approach to Scripture is the affirmation that Christ is God's final word to man - his eternal Word made flesh. He is the culmination of the diverse ways in which God has spoken since the beginning (Hebrews 1:1-3). In him God's saving and revealing purpose is fully and definitively realized.

Moses and the prophets received and spoke the word of God in the Spirit. By the power of the same Spirit the Word of God became flesh and accomplished his ministry. At Pentecost the same Spirit was given to the disciples to enable them to recall and interpret what Jesus did and taught, and so to proclaim the Gospel in truth and power.

The person and work of Jesus Christ, preached by the apostles and set forth and interpreted in the New Testament writings, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are the primary norm for Christian faith and life. Jesus, as the Word of God, sums up in

himself the whole of God's self-disclosure. The Church's essential task, therefore, in the exercise of its teaching office, is to unfold the full extent and implications of the mystery of Christ, under the guidance of the Spirit of the risen Lord.

No endeavour of the Church to express the truth can add to the revelation already given. Moreover, since the Scriptures are the uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation, the Church's expression of that revelation must be tested by its consonance with Scripture. Its teaching must always be rooted in the prophetic and apostolic writings.

7. Councils and Reception

The Commission has been accused of contradicting Article XXI of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion in its affirmation that the decisions of ecumenical councils 'exclude what is erroneous'. It has also been asked to say whether reception by the whole people of God is part of the process of the recognition of ecumenical councils.

The Commission is very far from saying that general councils cannot err and is well aware that they 'sometimes have erred'. For example there have been councils which have claimed the title 'ecumenical' but have not been recognized by the Universal Church (Ariminum and Seleucia of 359 AD). No-one has ever held that everything decreed even at a duly constituted general council is free of error. Article XXI in fact affirms that general councils have authority when their judgements 'may be declared that they be taken out of Holy Scripture'. According to the argument of the Venice Statement only those judgements of general councils are guaranteed to 'exclude what is erroneous' or are 'protected from

error' which have as their content 'fundamental matters of faith' or 'formulate the central truth of salvation', and which are 'consonant with Scripture' and 'faithful to Scripture and consistent with Tradition'. Such decisions 'do not add to the truth' (cf. Venice 19).

Reception is also part of the process of recognition: it is the final sign whether the necessary conditions for an ecumenical council have been met, for the Holy Spirit guides the Church to accept these conciliar judgements which have been protected from error by the same Holy Spirit (and to reject those which have not.) In this acceptance or rejection the whole Church is involved in a continuous process of discernment and response (cf. paragraph 6).

The Commission therefore avoids two extreme positions. On the one hand it rejects the view that a definition has no authority until it is accepted by the whole Church, and derives its authority solely from that acceptance. Equally, the Commission denies that a council is so self-sufficient that it owes nothing to reception. Ultimate acceptance by the People of God is a sign of truth in the Church.