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ARCIC 248/Infallibility/2

### Infallibility

22. It is Christ himself, the Way, the Truth and the Life, who entrusts the Gospel to us and gives to his Church teaching authority which claims our obedience. The Church as a whole indwelt by the Spirit according to Christ's promise and looking to the testimony of the prophets, saints and martyrs of every generation, is witness, teacher and guardian of the truth (cf. Venice 18a). The Church is confident that the Holy Spirit will effectually enable it to fulfil its mission so that it will neither lose its essential character nor fail to reach its goal.<sup>1</sup> We are agreed that doctrinal decisions made by legitimate authority must be consonant with the community's faith as grounded in scripture and interpreted by the mind of the Church, and that no teaching authority can add new revelation to the original apostolic faith (cf. Venice 2 and 18). We must then ask whether there is a special ministerial gift of discerning the truth and of teaching bestowed on one person to enable him to speak authoritatively at crucial times in the name of the Church in order to preserve the people of God in the truth.

23. Maintenance in the truth requires that at certain moments the Church can in a matter of essential doctrine make a decisive judgement which becomes part of its permanent witness.<sup>2</sup> Such a judgement makes it clear what the truth is, and strengthens the Church's confidence in proclaiming the Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the meaning of indefectibility, a term which does not speak of the Church's lack of defects but confesses that, despite all its many weaknesses and failures, Christ is faithful to his promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

<sup>2</sup> That this is in line with Anglican belief is clear from Article XX: 'The Church hath authority in controversies of faith.'

Obvious examples of such judgements are occasions when general councils define the faith. These judgements, by virtue of their foundation in revelation and their appropriateness to the need of the time, express a renewed unity in the truth to which they summon the whole Church.

24. The Church in all its members is involved in such a definition. This clarifies and enriches their grasp of the truth; their active reflection upon the definition in its turn clarifies its significance, although it is not through reception by the people of God that a definition first acquires authority, the assent of the faithful is the ultimate indication that the Church's authoritative decision in a matter of faith has been truly preserved from error by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who maintains the Church in the truth will bring its members to receive the definition as true and to assimilate it if what has been declared genuinely expounds the revelation.

25. The Church exercises teaching authority through various instruments and agencies at various levels (cf. Venice 9 and 18-22). When matters of faith are at stake decisions may be made by the Church in universal councils; we are agreed that these are authoritative (cf. Venice 19). We have also recognised the need in a united Church for a universal primate, who, presiding over the koinonia can speak with authority in the name of the Church (cf. Venice 23). Through both these agencies the Church can make a decisive judgement in matters of faith and so exclude error.

26. The purpose of this service cannot be to add to the content of revelation, but is to recall and emphasise some

important truth; to expound the faith more lucidly; to expose error; to draw out implications not sufficiently recognised; and to show how Christian truth applies to contemporary issues. These statements would be intended to articulate, elucidate or define matters of faith which the community believes at least implicitly. The welfare of the koinonia does not require that all the statements of those who speak authoritatively on behalf of the Church should be considered permanent expressions of the truth. But situations may occur where serious divisions of opinion on crucial issues of pastoral urgency call for a more definitive judgement. Any such statement would be intended as an expression of the mind of the Church, understood not only in the context of its time and place but also in the light of the Church's whole experience and tradition. All such definitions are provoked by specific historical situations and are always made in terms of the understanding and framework of their age (cf. Venice 15). But in the continuing life of the Church, they retain a lasting significance if they are safeguarding the substance of the faith. The Church's teaching authority is a service to which the faithful look for guidance especially in times of uncertainty; but the assurance of the truthfulness of its teaching rests ultimately rather upon its fidelity to the Gospel than upon the character or office of the person by whom it is expressed. The Church's teaching is proclaimed because it is true; it is not true simply because it has been proclaimed. The value of such authoritative proclamation lies in the guidance that it gives to the faithful. However, neither general councils nor universal primates are invariably preserved from

error even in official declarations (See Elucidations, 3).

27. The Church's judgement is normally given through synodal decision, but at times the primate acting in communion with his fellow bishops may articulate the decision even outside a synod. Although responsibility for preserving the Church from fundamental error is a gift which belongs to the whole Church, it may be exercised on its behalf by a universal primate. The exercise of authority in the Church need not have the effect of stifling the freedom of the Spirit to inspire other agencies and individuals. In fact, there have been times in the history of the Church when both councils and universal primates have protected legitimate positions which have been under attack.

28. A service of preserving the Church from error has been performed by the bishop of Rome as universal primate both within and outside the synodal process. The judgement of Leo I, for example, in his letter received by the Council of Chalcedon helped to maintain a balanced view of the two natures in Christ. This does not mean that other bishops are restricted to a merely consultative role, nor that every statement of the bishop of Rome instantly solves the immediate problem or decides the matter at issue for ever. To be an authoritative discernment of the truth, the judgement of the bishop of Rome must satisfy rigorous conditions. He must speak explicitly as the focus within the koinonia; without being under duress from external pressures; having sought to discover the mind of his fellow bishops and of the Church as a whole; and with a clear intention to issue a binding decision upon a matter of faith or morals. Some of these

conditions were laid down by the First Vatican Council.

When it is plain that all these conditions have been fulfilled, Roman Catholics conclude that the judgement is preserved from error and the proposition true. If the definition proposed for assent were not to be manifestly a legitimate interpretation of biblical faith and in line with orthodox tradition, Anglicans would think it a duty to reserve the reception of the definition for study and discussion.

29. This approach is illustrated by the reaction of many Anglicans to the Marian definitions, which are the only examples of such dogmas promulgated by the bishop of Rome since the separation of our two communions. Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree in much of the truth that these two dogmas are designed to affirm. We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation. We agree in recognising that Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and of the Church. We agree in recognising the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (Theotokos), in observing her festivals, and in according her honour in the communion of saints. We agree that she was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer, by whom she herself was redeemed and received into glory. We further agree in recognising in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians. We accept that it is possible to regard her as a prophetic figure of the Church of God before as well as after the Incarnation.<sup>1</sup> The dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption raise a special problem for those Anglicans who do not consider that the precise definition given by these dogmas is sufficiently

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<sup>1</sup> The affirmation of the Roman Catholic Church that Mary was conceived without original sin is based on recognition of her unique role within the mystery of the Incarnation. By being thus prepared to be the mother of our Redeemer, she also becomes a sign that the salvation won by Christ was operative among all mankind before his birth. The affirmation that her glory in heaven involves full participation in the fruits of salvation expresses and reinforces our faith that the life of the world to come has already broken into the life of our world. It is the conviction of Roman Catholics that the Marian dogmas formulate a faith consonant with Scripture.

supported by Scripture. Claims which have been made in respect of the teaching authority of the bishop of Rome are not in the Anglican view enhanced by the fact that it has served to promote the Marian formulations. Anglicans would also ask whether, in any future union between our two Churches, they would be required to subscribe to such dogmatic statements. One consequence of our separation has been a tendency for Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike to exaggerate the importance of the Marian dogmas in themselves at the expense of other truths more closely related to the foundation of the Christian faith (cf. Unitatis Redintegratio, 11).

30. In spite of our agreement over the need of a universal primacy in a united Church, Anglicans do not accept the guaranteed possession of such a gift of divine assistance in judgement necessarily attached to the office of the bishop of Rome by virtue of which his formal decisions can be known to be wholly assured before their reception by the faithful. Nevertheless the problem about reception is inherently difficult. It would be incorrect to suggest that in controversies of faith no conciliar or papal definition possesses a right to attentive sympathy and acceptance until it has been examined by every individual Christian and subjected to the scrutiny of his private judgement.<sup>1</sup> We agree that, without a special charism guarding the judgement of the universal primate, the Church

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<sup>1</sup> Acceptance by the Church as a whole must not be confused with official approval by the bishops as a condition of authenticity. The phrase 'such definitions are irreformable by themselves and not by reason of the agreement of the Church' (DS.3074) was added to Pastor Aeternus to exclude the opinion of some Gallicans and Conciliarists who regarded subsequent approval by the bishops as necessary in order to constitute a statement's 'irreformability'. The use of the term irreformable does not imply that these definitions are the Church's last word as if the matter could not be restated in other terms. 'Agreement' is to be understood in its juridical sense, meaning 'official approval' and not in the more general sense of acceptance by the Church as a whole.

would still possess means of receiving and ascertaining; the truth of revelation. This is evident in the acknowledged gifts of grace and truth granted to churches not in perfect communion with the Roman see.

31. Roman Catholic tradition has used the term infallibility to describe guaranteed freedom from fundamental error in judgement.<sup>1</sup> We agree that this is a term applicable only to God, and that to use it of a human being, even in highly restricted circumstances, can produce many misunderstandings. That is why in stating our belief in the preservation of the Church from error we have avoided using the term. We also recognise that the ascription to the bishop of Rome of infallibility under certain conditions has tended to lend exaggerated importance to all his statements.

32. We have already been able to agree that conciliarity and primacy are complementary (Venice 22-23). We can now together affirm that the Church needs both a multiple, dispersed authority, with which all God's people are actively involved, and also a universal primate as servant and focus of visible unity in truth and love. This does not mean that all differences have been eliminated; but if any Petrine function and office are exercised in the living Church of which a universal primate is called to serve as a visible focus, then it inheres in his office that he should have both a defined teaching responsibility and appropriate gifts of the Spirit to enable him to discharge it.

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<sup>1</sup> In Roman Catholic doctrine, infallibility means only the preservation of the judgement from error for the maintenance of the Church in the truth, not positive inspiration or revelation. Moreover the infallibility ascribed to the bishop of Rome is a gift to be, in certain circumstances and under precise conditions, an organ of the infallibility of the Church.