

The General Synod Committee for Christian Unity

Response to *The Gift of Authority*

Preface

The Committee for Christian Unity appointed the following to study the ARCIC II document *The Gift of Authority*, who were affirmed by the Standing Committee: the Bishop of Cashel and Ossory, the Rev. Dr. Ian Ellis, Canon Michael Kennedy, Canon Clive West, the Rev. Olive Donohoe, the Rev. Maurice Elliott, the Rev. John McDowell, the Rev. Elizabeth McElhinney, the Rev. Bob Gray and Mr. Dermot O'Callaghan. The Bishop of Cashel was elected Chairperson and the Rev. Bob Gray as secretary to the Group. The Rev. Liz McElhinney was unable to serve on the committee. The Study Group met on four occasions.

Note:- References to paragraph numbers are to those in *The Gift of Authority* unless otherwise indicated.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESPONSE

1.1. Since Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI declared their intention in 1966 to form a dialogue between our two communions, the First and Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commissions have published extensive material on major theological subjects for all our consideration and we place on record once again our gratitude to the members of both commissions for all their work during a period now of over thirty years.

1.2. The Lambeth Conference of 1998 and our General Synod in 1999 both reaffirmed their commitment to the visible unity of the church and, in responding to this most recent work on authority by ARCIC-II, we believe that this vision must remain an inspiring motivation as Anglicans and Roman Catholics continue faithfully to pursue ever deeper ecumenical life and witness.

1.3. The unity in truth, holiness and love that we seek is to be a unity in flourishing diversity and we regard a major role and purpose of authority in the church as the enabling of precisely such a diversity. We hope that our comments here will assist towards this end.

2. COMMENTS ON THE INTRODUCTION TO THE AGREED STATEMENT

2.1. In outlining the progress in the convergence in our two communions' understanding of authority, we believe the commission presents a rather more positive picture than is entirely justified. The affirmation at paragraph 1 that "the Spirit of the Risen Lord maintains the people of God in obedience to the Father's will", for example, does not take any account of the extent to which the work of the Holy Spirit is in fact frustrated by human sin and even by errors that are completely unintentional.

2.2. Paragraph 1 also affirms that the laity have "an integral part in decision making in the Church", but the commission's affirmation is not sufficiently developed in the agreed statement in terms of precisely how this lay participation is actually to function.

2.3. Despite what ARCIC-I said about the need for a universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome (to which reference is made at paragraph 1), we do not believe it is helpful to join the two issues of universal primacy and location in an essentially inseparable way. These are, in fact, quite separate matters (cf. para. 4.11 below). We also note that at paragraph 1 the commission refers to the envisaged universal primate in exclusively male terms and suggest that this is an as yet unresolved issue.

2.4. We greatly welcome Pope John Paul II's invitation to other churches, in *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), to engage with him in dialogue on how the particular ministry of the Bishop of Rome might be exercised in a new situation, to which reference is made in paragraph 4 of the document, and we set forth our own comments on this at paragraph 4.11 below.

2.5. We also warmly welcome the commission's view, expressed at paragraph 5, rejecting "oppressive and destructive" patterns in the exercise of authority and affirming, with appropriate scriptural references, that it is "in conformity with the mind and example of Christ that the Church is called to exercise authority." The reference to authority here leads on to the designation, in paragraph 6, of authority as a "gift" to the church, but we feel that the ensuing discussion of authority is overly focused on people. This does not do justice to the Anglican view of authority as dispersed, among scripture, reason, tradition and "people". In so far as authority, exercised in love, is a gift of God to the church, it is to enable that diversity which is reflected in God's many gifts to his people (Eph. 4:11-13).

3. COMMENTS ON THE AGREED STATEMENT'S CHAPTER II, "AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH"

3.1. While the theme of "God's 'Yes' to Us and our 'Amen' to God" (cf. paragraph 8) is attractive in many ways, it is nonetheless a somewhat complex concept. It is by no means clear that this text at 2 Corinthians 1 can bear the enormous weight that is made to rest upon it in the agreed statement. We believe the commission's exegesis of the text here is rather overdeveloped.

3.2. We believe that great care is needed in moving from the believer's "Amen" to Christ to the believer's "Amen" to the faith of the church (paragraph 12). We detect a significant theological shift here. While there is truth in the commission's assertion, it cannot be taken to imply a "lock, stock and barrel" acceptance of every item of church teaching. That could amount to a complete submission to a magisterium, which we would regard as intellectually oppressive.

3.3. We believe that a useful point is made at paragraph 13: "The believer is incorporated in an "Amen" of faith, older, deeper, broader, richer than the individual's "Amen" to the Gospel. So the relation between the faith of the individual and the faith of the Church is more complex than may sometimes appear." However, we find the remainder of this paragraph rather vague and, consequently, unclear. While we can accept that the eucharist is central to the local Christian community's life, the same must also be said of scripture which constitutes God's word to us in a unique way.

3.4. The use of the word "Tradition" at paragraph 14 fails to identify the normative role of scripture as transmitting an original and authentic witness to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and as containing "all things necessary to salvation" (Articles of Religion, 6). The contrast is not so much between "Tradition" and "tradition" as between scripture and tradition. If scripture is to be considered as apostolic tradition then the qualitative distinction between this and all later "traditions" must be fully acknowledged. It is not clear, in spite of what is said later at paragraph 19, that the commission has fully faced the implications of this important distinction. We feel that the commission's distinctions between Tradition, tradition, traditions and apostolic Tradition are ultimately more confusing than helpful, running the risk, in the end, of actually blurring the very distinctions that the commission seems to wish to clarify.

3.5. We welcome the commission's affirmation of scripture as "uniquely authoritative" (paragraph 19). However, we do not believe that the agreed statement draws out the full implications of this affirmation. We believe scripture is to be regarded as a separate category rather than "within Tradition", as here (paragraph 19). Scripture is the very word of God and, as the commission's quote from *Authority I* states, is "uniquely inspired". Anglicans speak of scripture, reason and tradition as three strands of dispersed authority. If scripture is "uniquely inspired" (however that is to be explicated), this clearly places it in a category of its own.

3.6. While the receiving and handing on of scripture, declaring it to be inspired and authoritative, may be described itself an act of authority (cf. paragraph 22), scripture is not to be received because the church says so but rather because, after a long and complex process involving trial *and error*. The truly inspired documents have been generally and widely recognised as such. It must be added however that the precise status of the deuterocanonical books is not an entirely resolved matter (cf. Article 6).

3.7. While it is true that God's revelation has been entrusted to a community, the prophetic voices of individuals must not be ignored. We believe that the recovery of scriptural truth at the Reformation was to a considerable extent the work of such individuals. While "individualistic interpretations" (cf. paragraph 23) clearly must be regarded as such, we believe the commission appears over-anxious at this point.

3.8. The issue of reception is fundamental to ecumenical dialogues. We do not see reception as the same as obedience; we feel that the commission comes close - albeit rather ambiguously so - to such a position when it states that "reception is at one and the same time an act of faithfulness and of freedom" (paragraph 24). (Cf. also our comments at paragraphs 4.4 and 4.8 below.) Rather, we see reception as a process of discernment by the whole people of God.

3.9. Re-reception is not only a matter of recovering some element of ecclesial communion which has been "forgotten, neglected or abused" (paragraph 25). There may be cases of actual error that need to be corrected, a point which we believe is perhaps hinted at. However if so, the point is much too weakly made in the commission's reference here to a "sifting" of what has been received because of formulations that seem to be "inadequate or even misleading in a new context."

3.10. We warmly welcome the affirmation of ecclesial diversity at paragraph 27: "As God has created diversity among humans, so the Church's fidelity and identity require not uniformity of expression and formulation at all levels in all situations, but rather catholic diversity within the unity of communion." We would also endorse the call, at paragraph 30, for those who exercise *episcopate* not to be separated from the "symphony" of the whole people of HR...

God. This approach, however, tends against the prevailing view of the church in the agreed statement which appears generally to distinguish between the "teaching" church and the "learning" church. There is an acknowledgement of the role of the *sensus fidelium*, but how this operates is not clearly developed.

4. COMMENTS ON THE AGREED STATEMENT'S CHAPTER III, "THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH"

4.1. Unity in faith and unity in life are certainly related (cf. paragraph 33), but the unity in faith that is required for a credible unity in life is not necessarily an absolute unity. Diversity in the understanding of the faith is clearly possible within a single fellowship. The 1997 *Agros Report* of the Anglican Communion's Ecumenical Advisory Group stated:

"In the life of the Anglican Communion, whenever major issues have appeared to threaten it, there has been discussion of the nature and permissible limits of diversity and the effectiveness of Anglican structures to hold the Communion together. At its best, Anglican unity is characterised by generosity and mutual tolerance in diversity. It demonstrates a willingness to contain difference and to live with tension, even conflict, as the church seeks the mind of Christ on controversial issues that threaten its unity. Anglican comprehensiveness is not a sign of weakness or uncertainty of the central truths of the faith, nor does it mean that there are no tolerable limits to the differences which impair unity."

Paradoxically, for the church to live as a "community of reconciliation" implies that it contains certain differences. If there were no diversity, no difference, the church simply could not be a community of reconciliation. Those who are reconciled do not become identical, but accept each other in their difference.

4.2. When the commission refers at paragraph 33 to disagreement about "the Gospel itself", we fear that the underlying understanding of what the Gospel is, is much too broad in scope; in fact, it is probably so broad that differences of opinion are inevitable. The need for a common eucharist is clear (also paragraph 33), but the preconditions in terms of doctrinal uniformity, which Rome sets, militate against precisely this. It has to be said that one of the chief causes of division in the church, historically, has been the will to exercise authority and jurisdiction; the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, as well as being a force for unity, has also undoubtedly been at the centre of major disputes and a cause of disunity. The final reference in this paragraph to "legitimate diversity" is good, but it should have been the controlling theme rather than an apparently rather casual comment.

4.3. One can only agree with the statement at paragraph 35: "The way in which authority is exercised in the structures and corporate life of the Church must be conformed to the mind of Christ (cf. Phil. 2.5)" who is our model of servant leadership (cf. Luke 22:24-27; John 13:1-17). Comment has already been made in this connection at paragraph 2.5 above.

4.4. When ARCIC states, "Decisions taken by the bishop... have an authority which the faithful have a duty to receive and accept" (paragraph 36), the commission runs the risk of over-stating the case. The faithful have a duty to respect episcopal decisions. Accepting decisions is perhaps implicit in such respect, but this becomes very dangerous territory when the bishop is divorced from the synodical process, which strangely seems to be the case here, despite the introduction of the concept of synodality. Para. 36 appears to move away from synodical to solely episcopal government. One is left wondering precisely what the commission understands by synodality in practical terms, and precisely how one is to understand the commission's own statement here that there is a "complementary relationship between the bishop and the rest of the community"; it appears as though this complementarity is to be allowed to exist only up to a point.

4.5. What is said in paragraph 38 about the bishops' role being "magisterial" in the determination of what is to be taught reflects a particularly Roman Catholic perspective. We believe that the Holy Spirit is bestowed on the whole church to lead it into all truth, this being recognised in the synodical structure in most parts of the Anglican Communion in so far as matters of faith and order are determined by bishops, clergy and laity together, and not by bishops only. There is a significant difference, we believe, between saying that a House of Bishops is integral to such a process and saying that bishops are "to determine" what is to be taught and practised.

4.6. Paragraph 39 does not appear to recognise variations in practice within the Anglican Communion. Decisions of a diocesan synod in the Church of Ireland require the bishop's consent to stand (cf. paragraph 39); faith and order matters being decided, not by diocesan synods, but by the General Synod in which there is also a decisive episcopal role.

4.7. We understand that for Roman Catholics, infallibility means that at specific moments the church's teaching in matters of faith and morals can be proclaimed at the time of its definition as surely and absolutely free from error, therefore commanding certitude. Indeed, the Vatican's 1982 document, *Observations on the Final Report of ARCIC* (the first Commission), indicates that infallibility "refers immediately not to truth but to certitude" (B, III, 3). The

indefectibility of the church - more generally the Anglican approach - means that the church, despite its very fallibility, is maintained in the truth. The commission tries to conflate infallibility and indefectibility by arguing that "infallible teaching is at the service of indefectibility" (paragraph 42). However, an infallible magisterium is not necessary for the church to be maintained in the truth, and where the idea of infallibility has been put into practice the result has not been helpful. Indefectibility works, not through an infallible magisterium but through the unfathomable providence of God. It is a matter of trust in God. Indefectibility, moreover, has a vital and dynamic eschatological dimension that the much more static, cut and dried infallibility lacks. Furthermore, in proposing not only an infallible magisterium but also papal infallibility, there is a conspicuous absence in *The Gift of Authority* of any reference to the Marian dogmas (1854 and 1950). In a pastoral letter following the publication of the 1950 Dogma of the Assumption, the Church of Ireland House of Bishops protested "against the defining, as part of the divinely-given Faith of Christ, of a doctrine which possesses the acceptance of only a section of Christendom, resting as it does on no scriptural authority or historical evidence, and not even on any support from the writings of the most ancient fathers."

4.8. The commission states at paragraph 43 : "Since it is the faithfulness of the whole people of God that is at stake, reception of teaching is integral to the process. Doctrinal definitions are received as authoritative in virtue of the divine truth they proclaim as well as because of the specific office of the person or persons who proclaim them within the *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God." This paragraph may appear to endorse the need for the reception by the people of God of definitions of the faith for those definitions to be fully authoritative. If that is what is intended by the text, it accords with a very important principle for Anglicans, namely reception. However, is this in fact what the Commission is saying? The text as quoted reads: "Doctrinal definitions *are* received as authoritative...." (our italics), suggesting that reception is "integral to the process" because the faithful are obliged to receive teaching rather than because teaching is dependent on reception by the faithful, as part of the complementarity of the process, to be fully authoritative. In the Vatican's *Observations* document (quoted in our last paragraph), it was indicated that the latter view of reception "is not in accord with Catholic teaching" (B, III, 5).

4.9. When paragraph 43 speaks of God's "Yes" revealed in Christ as "the standard by which such authoritative teaching is judged", the Commission can be understood to be using the word "judge" not in the sense of passing judgement but simply as a reference to the intellectual aspect of receiving teaching. Indeed, the paragraph's next sentence states: "Such teaching is to be welcomed by the people of God....".

4.10. Paragraph 44 asserts that "the authenticity of the teaching of individual bishops is evident when this teaching is in solidarity with that of the whole episcopal college." This does not appear to envisage the situation in which one bishop may maintain the truth in face of the otherwise unanimous neglect of truth by the rest of the bishops. There was a time when, as Jerome put it, "the whole world groaned and found itself Arian" and when Athanasius stood *contra mundum*. The commission's view here is simply too "neat".

4.11. We agree with the commission that the "exigencies of church life call for a specific exercise of *episcopate* at the service of the whole Church." (paragraph 46). In the Church of Ireland's response to the *Final Report* of ARCIC-I, we already accepted that "in a reunited Church a form of universal primacy may be desirable" (*The Response of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland to the Final Report of ARCIC-I, May 1986*, Dublin, APCK 1987, p.22). For many Anglicans, the observation of the ministry exercised within the Anglican Communion by the Archbishop of Canterbury, as *primus inter pares*, leads to the conclusion that there may be a highly significant role for the global ministry of a universal primate. However, it is the terms of such a universal primacy that are important. We believe that the universal primacy in a reunited church (1) should be constitutional in form, (2) should not have any unique magisterial powers, (3) should be non-jurisdictional, and (4) should not necessarily be associated with Rome. The universal primate in such a church, we believe, should perform a primarily pastoral role, as distinct from a magisterial/jurisdictional one.

4.12. The commission states at paragraph 47: "Within his wider ministry, the Bishop of Rome offers a specific ministry concerning the discernment of truth, as an expression of universal primacy.... In solemnly formulating such teaching, the universal primate must discern and declare, with the assured assistance and guidance of the Holy Spirit, in fidelity to Scripture and Tradition, the authentic faith of the whole Church, that is, the faith proclaimed from the beginning." Although the word "infallibility" is not employed in this context, there can be no doubt that the dogma is clearly intended by the use of the phrase "with the assured assistance and guidance of the Holy Spirit". In this connection, we would refer to our comments on infallibility and indefectibility at paragraph 25 above.

4.13. While it is good to note how the commission says that "loyal criticism and reforms are sometimes needed" (paragraph 48), the reform of specifically "infallible" teaching can be taken as excluded as this would, by definition, be irreformable.

4.14. We find paragraph 49 reassuring in its initial part, but proceeding to appear to restrict the very freedom of conscience just affirmed by stating that "In freely accepting the way of salvation offered through baptism, the Christian disciple also freely takes on the discipline of being a member of the Body of Christ." There is, certainly,

discipline involved in belonging to the church, but we feel that the commission is hinting at something that could have the potential to be, in fact, quite oppressive. The recognition of the rights of conscience should have had a more central and determinative place in the thinking of the commission.

5. COMMENTS ON THE AGREED STATEMENT'S CHAPTER IV: "AGREEMENT IN THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY: STEPS TOWARDS VISIBLE UNITY"

5.1. Paragraph 53 refers to the *Virginia Report*. Despite some of the suggestions in the *Virginia Report*, Anglican history has largely been one of devolution of powers to provincial synods as new provinces have come into being. Consultation, through the Primates, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lambeth Conference, maintains our "bonds of affection". However, within Anglicanism (as within Orthodoxy), communion is best maintained on a voluntary basis. Certainly, there has been impairment of communion within Anglicanism over women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate, but the definition of Anglican *koinonia* as being in communion with the See of Canterbury (as opposed to the Church of England) leaves the way open for the *primus inter pares* formally to cease communion with an individual or province. (We offer these comments also in relation to the agreed statement's paragraph 56.)

5.2. We do not consider it appropriate that Anglican bishops should join in *ad limina* visits of Roman Catholic bishops to the Vatican (paragraph 59). The involvement of Anglican bishops in such visits could very easily appear to imply a recognition of some form of papal jurisdiction over Anglican churches. Indeed, this proposal of the commission (of Anglican bishops joining in *ad limina* visits) is clearly linked to the commission's proposed recognition of papal primacy before there is communion (paragraph 60). However, we do not believe that there can be any meaningful primacy without communion.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

6.1. As Anglicans we respond to *The Gift of Authority* whilst conscious of current discussion within the Anglican Communion of the manner in which authority in the Communion can be exercised. In view of difficulties which emerge from time to time as a result of the autonomy of individual Anglican Provinces it has been suggested that a more centralised and effective authority within the Communion is required. Such a suggestion would seem to have the consent of the Anglican members of ARCIC-II. However, in spite of the *Virginia Report*, we note that such thinking has failed to win significant support among the Provinces of the Anglican Communion. Discussions at Lambeth 1998 and at the Anglican Consultative Council in 1999 revealed that Anglicanism has not been won over to the concept of more centralised authority. Ways in which mutual accountability can be developed are generally welcomed by Anglicans but, while recognising the roles of the Archbishop of Canterbury as *primus inter pares*, the Lambeth Conference, the Primates' Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council, further development beyond a moral and consultative form of authority is not seen as helpful.

6.2. There is the implication in *The Gift of Authority* that it is desirable that there should be an ultimate and final authoritative voice in the church, or at least that once the need for authority in the Church is established, there should be at some stage in the process an authority that is absolute. Our response here has been based on the conviction that such authority resides dynamically in the Triune God, and that the way in which God maintains the church in truth cannot be defined in any precise manner. This is an expression of the concept of dispersed rather than of a centralised authority.

6.3. The methodology of *The Gift of Authority* has created some unease for us as we have sought to make our response. We have pointed out the ambiguity that occurs in several places, and in particular in the discussion of the role of scripture and tradition. Similar ambiguity results when a case is built on a basis that is weak in that it does not necessarily lead only to the chosen conclusion, as for example in the handling of the divine and human 'Amen' (2 Cor. 1:18-20) in paragraph 8. A more truly critical exegesis of scripture is required

6.4. We welcome this further attention given to the subject of authority by ARCIC-II and, while we are not of the view that the agreed statement, *The Gift of Authority*, presents a generally satisfactory conclusion, we wish to encourage the commission to continue to work towards an agreement that will prove acceptable to both the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. It is clear that the difficulties lying ahead in this endeavour should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, we intend the comments offered here to assist our two communions in the further work that clearly will be needed on this important subject. We take this opportunity of expressing our prayerful good wishes for the continuing work of this dialogue.