

Article Review : *The Gift of Authority*

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Introduction

This report, the third in the series *Authority in the church*, is the fruit of a dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church which goes back more than 30 years. The first two statements on the subject were published together in what was optimistically termed 'The Final Report' in 1981, and it took more than ten years for the dialogue to proceed to the next stage. The discussions which led to the present statement began in 1993 and were completed in the summer of 1998. Like the earlier statements, it has no official character in itself, but is presented to the two churches for their evaluation. It is not entirely clear who will do the official evaluating, or what form it will take, but it is important for members of each church to express their own reactions so that these are at least available for consideration at a later stage. Initial reactions to it from the Anglican side have been largely negative, and not only among conservative Evangelicals. By now it must be quite clear to everyone involved that if any form of visible unity between Canterbury and Rome is achieved in the foreseeable future there will be a schism in the Anglican Church, for the simple reason that such unity is not possible without Anglican acceptance of the 'universal primacy' of the Bishop of Rome, and there are large numbers of Anglicans who will never submit to papal authority in any form. The only real question is whether there is any prospect of creating a body of opinion within the Anglican Communion large enough, and committed enough to reunion with Rome, that it can afford to ignore the inevitable divisions within its own ranks. For reasons which will become apparent, there is no comparable danger of schism on the Roman side. Whatever the Papacy might decide to 'give away' in the search for reunion with Anglicans, the vast majority of Roman Catholics will be completely unaffected by it. From the Roman standpoint, the reunion of the Churches means (and can only mean) reabsorption into the Roman fold, and any changes which may occur along the way will only be cosmetic. This should not be understood as some kind of Machiavellian deceit on Rome's part; the logic of Roman ecclesiology means that it must be this way, whether we like it or not. The simple truth is that from the Roman point of view, any union which is not rooted in the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome is not in union at all, but division. No Catholic is prepared to jettison the Papacy in the search for Christian unity, so that the concessions, if there are to be any, will have to come from the Anglican side, if there is to be any reunion at all. That is the underlying assumption of this, as of the two previous statements, and we ought to recognise it from the start.

The commission believes that it has already achieved agreement on at least six points, which are listed on page 9, and four of them concern the Papacy either directly or indirectly. In other words, Anglicans and Roman Catholics have apparently *already agreed* about 'the need for a universal primacy exercised by the Bishop of Rome as a sign and safeguard of unity within a

reunited Church'.¹ The present statement is therefore only an attempt to clarify what that means and to produce a form of words which might help to turn this agreement into reality. Many Anglicans (including virtually all evangelical ones) would dispute this premise, since they have never agreed to this, and ARCIC would be very unwise to proceed on the assumption that they have. Here we are confronted with an obvious difference of perception which has to be tackled before any further discussion is possible. For some this will inevitably appear as if we are going behind the present statement to resurrect issues which have supposedly been dealt with, but they must try to understand that the commission has been building on an assumed agreement which does not in fact exist. 'Backtracking' is therefore necessary, if there is to be any realistic critique of the issues, and not merely of the words of the third statement itself.

Before going into detail, it might be useful to recall certain fundamental points which govern (and bedevil) ecumenical discussions in general, and which have affected ARCIC in particular. The first is the important distinction which is drawn between principle and practice. Most ecumenical dialogue concentrates on the former, believing that if agreement can be reached in principle, differences of practice can be accommodated without too much difficulty. Thus ARCIC claims that both our Churches agree that 'the Spirit of the Risen Lord maintains the people of God in obedience to the Father's will'.² As stated, it is hard to disagree with this, but one has only to bring up a controversial issue to realize how difficult it is to apply this principle in practice. Since those words were first written, many Anglican provinces have ordained women, and those in favour of that move have often claimed the Spirit's guidance in so doing. But why would the Holy Spirit lead some Anglicans (though by no means all) in this way, when he is apparently leading Roman Catholics in exactly the opposite direction? What is 'the Father's will' in this case, and which group is the Holy Spirit maintaining in it? In other words, which side has the right to claim to be the 'people of God'? These are uncomfortable questions, but they demonstrate the inadequacy of statements of agreed principle which do not take practical application into account. Unfortunately, this statement, like its predecessors, is full of such 'agreements' which are just as susceptible to dissolution when the acid test of practice is applied to them.

Another problem with ecumenism is that it makes a conscious effort 'to get behind opposed and entrenched positions to discover and develop our common inheritance' (pp 11-12). Once again, the principle sounds admirable and there may be cases where such a procedure is indeed helpful in resolving difficulties which have emerged because of past misunderstandings. Unfortunately, one of the main ways in which ecumenists do this is by reusing theological terms in ways which are disconcerting to those accustomed to the so-called 'entrenched positions'. Very often, they seek to go back to earlier stages in the history of Christian theology, when a particular word or expression was capable of bearing more meanings than was subsequently the case. By rediscovering this and by re-employing these words in a supposedly more primitive sense or senses, ecumenists hope that they can create umbrella concepts which will reconcile different approaches to the issues involved. In this statement, the word chosen to receive this treatment is 'tradition', which turns out to have at least four distinctive meanings. These are spelled out in an all-important footnote (p 16) as follows:

1 'Tradition' with a capital T, means the Gospel.

- 2 'Tradition' with a small 't', which is unfortunately lost at the beginning of a sentence, which means 'the traditionary process', i.e. the handing on of the revealed truth.
- 3 'Traditions' in the plural, means 'the peculiar features of liturgy, theology, canonical and ecclesial life in the various cultures and faith communities'.
- 4 'Tradition' in the phrase 'apostolic Tradition' means 'the content of what has been transmitted from apostolic times and continues to be the foundation of Christian life and theology'.

The snag here is that those locked in 'entrenched positions' recognize only the third of these possibilities as having something to do with 'tradition' and even then they would want to define it somewhat differently. They reject the first definition because they do not see why the gospel should not be called by its proper name, rather than be concealed under such a generic term. The second definition they scarcely bother with. As for 'apostolic Tradition' Protestants identify this with the New Testament and want to know why that term is not adequate to describe it. There may well be practices (eg the signing with the cross at baptism) which go back to the apostles, but unless they are specifically mentioned or implied in the New Testament it is dangerous to assume that this is the case and wrong to impose acceptance of them as mandatory for believers. The third definition is broadly acceptable, though most conservatives would want to omit 'theology' from it and state explicitly, rather than merely imply, that what we are talking about are practices which are not sanctioned by Holy Scripture.

A third habit common to ecumenical documents is that they are given a scriptural basis, not only because Holy Scripture is regarded as fundamental and common to all Christians, but also because it is one area in which academic study at least is now fully ecumenical in practice. The ARCIC statement is set in the context of 2 Corinthians 1:18-20, which reads as follows:

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you ... was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God.

The way in which the statement interprets this passage is a study in itself. According to it, what this means is that God has said 'Yes' to humanity and that humanity is now invited to respond by saying 'Amen' to God. This is what the church, as the redeemed people of God, actually does, saying 'Amen' not merely to the promise of God fulfilled in Christ, but also to the 'apostolic Tradition' (para 16). Furthermore: 'In Jesus Christ, Son of God and born of a woman, the Yes of God to humanity and the Amen of humanity to God become concrete human reality. This theme of God's Yes and humanity's Amen in Jesus Christ is the key to the exposition of authority in this statement' (para 8).

Yet if we look carefully at what St Paul is saying, we find that it is really something quite different from what ARCIC is claiming. What he is talking about is not

‘tradition’ or even ‘Tradition’ (ie the gospel), but his preaching. He is saying that his message has not been ambiguous, duplicitous or unclear in any way, but perfectly straightforward. God’s promises have been fulfilled in Christ (this is the ‘Yes’) and the apostles’ preaching has confirmed them because they have preached in and with the power of Christ (this is the ‘Amen’). Paul is telling the Corinthians that what he and his colleagues have said is trustworthy, and he is appealing to them to remain loyal to it. The ARCIC interpretation however, indulges in Christological speculation which the text itself does not support (and which is of doubtful orthodoxy), and then uses that as the basis for everything which follows. The belief that the humanity of Jesus is a model and example for us is one which has to be handled with the greatest care, since his incarnation cannot be separated from his divine nature and mission. It may be true to say that the humility which Jesus showed does set an example for us, but we must never ignore the important differences between Jesus’ ministry and ours. It is always tempting to turn Christ into the first Christian and hold up his earthly life as some kind of model for us to imitate, but even if everything which the statement says about the Son’s obedience to the Father is true, it nevertheless remains the case that he came not merely to take our place on the Cross, but also to condemn sin in the flesh. In other words, although Jesus stands for us, he also stands over against us, and for that reason his earthly life cannot be regarded as a simple model for the believer or for the church.

But if the Christology of the statement is dubious, the most important thing is that its interpretation of the biblical passage selected as the main theme is wrong, and would not be held by serious Pauline scholars, whether they are Anglicans or Catholics. This brings the rest of what the statement has to say into serious question, since it is self-consciously based on that interpretation. Later on in the statement we come across another example where Scripture and Christology are combined and misused. This is in paragraph 34, where we are told that the word ‘synodality’ derives from the Greek *synhodos*, which supposedly means ‘common way’.³ This doubtful etymology is then combined with three New Testament uses of the word ‘way’, including Jesus’ famous ‘I am the Way’ (John 14:6), as if synodality had something to do with that. This kind of hermeneutic is naïve and irresponsible, but unfortunately it is typical of the kind of thing often found in ecumenical documents. If Scripture is to function as the basis of the Church’s unity, which we all agree it ought to do, then it must be read and interpreted in a manner which is at least defensible, even if not everybody agrees on all the details. Failure to do so spells disaster for the ecumenical project as a whole, because no lasting consensus can be built on a reading of the most fundamental Christian authority which does not stand up to even the simplest critical investigation.

These are points which we must bear in mind as we look in detail at what the statement contains. The commission’s brief was to look in greater detail at three points of contention between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church which in the judgment of the ‘authorities’ of both bodies did not receive adequate or definitive treatment in the 1981 statements. These are set out on p 10 as follows:

1 The relationship between Scripture, Tradition and the exercise of teaching authority.

- 2 Collegiality, conciliarity and the role of the laity in decision making.
- 3 The Petrine ministry of universal primacy in relation to Scripture and tradition.

The second point can be dealt with very briefly, since the commission did not examine it in detail. The only part of it which really touches on this question is found in paragraphs 39-40, which are statements of fact more than anything else. From them we gather that in the Anglican Communion, every member church has a synodical structure in which lay people are fully represented, even if the form and extent of that representation is often less than ideal. But we also learn that the Roman Church has nothing even remotely comparable, and lay participation in decision making is minimal. The Second Vatican Council changed many things in the Church, but it did not do much to promote the role of laity, and in this respect it has to be said that for all its faults, Anglicanism is streets ahead of Rome. But we should also note that although this is quite clearly the case, lay involvement is not listed as something which Rome might have to learn from Anglicanism, an omission which shows quite clearly that it was not regarded as a priority on either side during the latest round of discussions.⁴

It is therefore to the other two points, each of which is discussed in some detail, that we must devote the greater part of our attention.

Scripture, Tradition and the Teaching Authority of the Church

The first and more fundamental point is that of the proper relationship between Scripture, Tradition and the teaching authority of the church. Here yet again we have to distinguish between statements of principle and actual practice. On Scripture the commission states quite clearly in paragraph 19: 'By receiving certain texts as true witnesses to divine revelation, the Church identified its Holy Scriptures. It regards this corpus alone as the inspired Word of God written and, as such, uniquely authoritative.' To this affirmation it then adds:

The Church's recognition of these Scriptures as canonical, after a long period of critical discernment, was at the same time an act of *obedience* and of *authority*. It was an act of obedience in that the Church discerned and received God's life-giving 'Yes' through the Scriptures, accepting them as the norm of faith. It was an act of authority in that the Church, under guidance of the Holy Spirit, received and handed on these texts, declaring that they were inspired and that others were not to be included in the canon. (paragraph 22)

Theologians who specialize in the doctrine of Scripture would doubtless want further clarification here, since there is a good deal which has been left unsaid. What, for example, are we to make of the so-called Apocrypha, or 'deuterocanonical' books of the Old Testament? But we should not expect ARCIC to answer every question of this kind. The important, and very positive thing here is that the report clearly accepts that Holy Scripture receives its character from God – it is his inspired Word – and that its authority in and over the church derives from that fact. To put it simply, what Scripture does depends on what Scripture is, a fundamental character of the person concerned.⁵ This is a most important point, and we can only be grateful to

the commission for having expressed it as clearly as it has. Certainly orthodox Anglicans will have no difficulty in assenting to this.⁶ If Roman Catholics can do the same, then we must rejoice in that here we have genuinely common ground from which to work.

Unfortunately, as we have already seen in other cases, the way in which the principle of scriptural authority is applied by the two Churches shows that there are vast differences between them which cannot be reconciled by a simple appeal to 'tradition' in any of its multiple senses. At the time of the Reformation, all the parties involved regarded 'tradition' as the sum of practices and beliefs handed on in the church without clear scriptural authority. Unlike some Protestants, Anglicans have always been happy to accept that tradition (understood in this sense) has a legitimate part to play in the church's life, as long as it does not contradict or obscure the explicit testimony of the Bible. Nevertheless, the Church of England did its best to purge itself of corrupt practices which had accumulated as a result of tradition and it reaffirmed the ancient principle of *sola Scriptura*, by which it meant that only the teaching of Scripture, both explicit and implicit, could be imposed as a requirement for salvation.⁷ In saying this, the Anglican divines were following the position adopted by the other reformed churches, though there were many variations of detail.⁸ At the time, Rome accepted the same definition of 'tradition' but understood it differently. For the Roman Church, tradition was also part of God's revelation, expanding and elaborating on what was contained in Scripture. To express it in modern terminology, tradition was the contextualization of Scripture in the course of the church's history. Thus, for example, the powers of the Papacy as they existed and were exercised in the sixteenth century could be traced back to Peter's famous confession in Matthew 16:16-19, even though Scripture does not say anything about the institution which was then (as now) located in Rome. Tradition provided the link between 'then' and 'now', and the arguments between Protestants and Catholics revolved around the legitimacy of this. For Protestants, this historical development was a corruption of the original intention of Jesus, whereas for Catholics it was a providential fulfilment of it in very different circumstances. The Catholic argument against *sola Scriptura* was that such a doctrine was inapplicable since it ignored historical changes which (as Catholics believed then and still believe now) were the work of the Holy Spirit, guiding and protecting the church of Christ.

In a sense, the Catholic view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition is similar to the Christian view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.⁹ All Christians believe that the Old Testament is the Word of God, but we also agree that it is now inapplicable as it stands. For the Old Testament to function as the Word of God it has to be understood in and through the revelation of God in Christ. In an analogous, if not entirely parallel fashion, the New Testament must now be interpreted through the teaching office (*magisterium*) of the church, which is ultimately controlled by the Pope, if it is to function as the Word of God for today.

It is precisely at this point that Protestants and Catholics part company, and the ARCIC report does nothing to help us overcome this problem. Its attempted solution (in line with broader ecumenical precedent) is to broaden the concept of 'tradition' to include matters like the 'gospel', which presumably refers in this context to the good news of salvation in Christ. Protestants however, have always taken this not only to be part of Scripture, but to be its chief underlying purpose and meaning. To call it 'Tradition' is confusing because it suggests that there may be a way to hear the gospel independently of Scripture. It can of course be objected that the

gospel antedates the New Testament and therefore must to some extent have been shaped by an oral tradition of sorts, but this objection is easily answered. First of all, both Jesus and the apostles proved their case from the Old Testament, which was already in existence. Secondly, the lapse of time between the gospel events and the composition of the New Testament was quite short, and well within living memory. Finally, the New Testament was written either by or under the supervision of the apostles, to whom the gospel was entrusted and who were by definition eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ.

The way in which the gospel reaches us today is by the expository preaching of the scriptural text, not by something called 'Tradition' handed down under the auspices of the institutional church. Ideally, of course, the church will foster the preaching of the gospel, as the Protestant Reformers all believed. But the reality is that this duty has often been obscured, and not only by Rome. Anglicans should not forget that in the eighteenth century John Wesley was virtually forced into the open air to preach, because the church authorities were hostile to his evangelistic campaigns. Even today, one suspects that most prominent Anglicans would far rather go to a committee meeting than stand up and preach the gospel, however much they may protest to the contrary. But the big difference between Rome and the Anglican Communion on this point is that Anglicans can and do denounce such situations as corrupt, and demand that the church should be continually reforming itself, so that the preaching of the gospel will retain its primacy. Can Roman Catholics do the same, or are they bound to say that the bureaucratization of the institutional church is the Holy Spirit's for God's people?

Perhaps it would be fairer to ask whether they believe that the ministry of the sacraments is distinct and even superior to the ministry of the Word. The ARCIC report says a good deal about the importance of baptism and the Eucharist, but neglects to state that these things, important as they are, are only adjuncts to the preaching ministry, where they serve to illustrate and confirm. The omission of evangelistic preaching is particularly apparent (and alarming) in paragraph 11, which talks about the way the Christian faith comes to individual believers as follows: 'The Gospel comes to people in a variety of ways: the witness and life of a parent or other Christian, the reading of the Scriptures, participation in the liturgy, or some other spiritual experience.' No doubt, but in the great majority of cases it is only the challenge which comes from the preaching of the gospel which convicts people of sin and brings them to repentance. Evangelicals in particular, cannot compromise on this, because it is the very heart of Christianity. The ARCIC statement says that 'when Christians do not agree about the Gospel itself, the preaching of it in power is impaired.' Evangelical Christians cannot accept this, and would want to say instead that 'when people calling themselves Christians do not understand the Gospel, the preaching of it in power is impaired'. The church is not primarily the company of the baptized, the confirmed, the ordained or the consecrated – it is the company of the convicted. The *sensus fidei* which unites all true believers in Christ (para 29) is indeed 'an active capacity for spiritual discernment', as the statement says, but it is not formed 'by worshipping and living in communion as a faithful member of the Church'. Rather it comes from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who gives new life and the assurance of eternal salvation to all who repent of their sins and put their trust in Christ. Of course such people may continue to differ about any number of things, and many will have difficulties with different aspects of the faith. But a person who has been born again knows it, and recognizes others who have had the same spiritual experience, regardless of the outward trappings. This is the true ecumenism, which permits a

genuine and deep spiritual fellowship across denominational barriers and which reveals the unity of the church in spite of human factors to the contrary. Here Evangelicals speak a different language to that of the ARCIC statement, but it is the language of the Bible to which generations of believers have borne witness, whether they have been conscious of handing down a 'tradition' or not.

The Petrine Ministry

The second great question which the ARCIC statement tackles is the nature of the 'Petrine ministry' which is claimed by the Bishop of Rome and which is denied or rejected by all non-Roman Catholic churches. Even the Eastern Orthodox Churches, which accept both the primacy of Peter among the apostles and the claim of the Roman see to be Peter's legate on earth, do not interpret this in anything like the way the Roman Church does. For them, 'primacy' means that the Pope is first among equals, and it is because he has claimed more than this that they are no longer in communion with him. The Anglican Communion has never expressed any definite opinion about these matters, but it is very unlikely that it would ever accept more than the Eastern Orthodox Churches would, and probable that they would in fact want a good deal less even than that. But before going into details, we must look at the way in which the ARCIC statement handles the matter and develops its logic.

The starting point, which may easily be missed by the incautious reader, is in paragraph 31, where it is stated that:

When Christian communities are in real but imperfect communion they are called to recognise in each other elements of the apostolic Tradition which they have rejected, forgotten or not yet fully understood. Consequently, they have to re-receive or reappropriate these elements, and reconsider the ways in which they have separately interpreted the Scriptures.

This statement is left vague – yet another principle without practical examples to illustrate it – but it would be hard to deny that the Anglican Communion has rejected the 'universal primacy' of the Bishop of Rome, which Roman Catholics naturally believe forms part of the apostolic Tradition. It would also be hard to deny that much of the remainder of the statement is taken up with examining how Anglicans might be persuaded to 're-receive' or reappropriate' that element, so that whatever else this sentence might include, the Roman primacy must be seen as part of it.

Once that is understood, the rest of the statement falls logically into place. There are four paragraphs outlining the meaning of primacy (paras 45-8), in which we read what the Church of Rome expects all other Christian churches to acknowledge. For instance, paragraph 47 states:

Within his wider ministry, the Bishop of Rome offers a specific ministry concerning the discernment of truth, as an expression of universal primacy... Any such definition is pronounced *within* the college of those who exercise *episcopate* and not outside that college... When the faith is articulated in this way, the Bishop of Rome proclaims the faith of the local churches. It is thus the wholly reliable teaching of the whole Church that is operative in the judgement of the universal primate. 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... It is this faith which the Bishop of Rome in certain circumstances has a duty to discern and make explicit. This form of authoritative teaching has no stronger guarantee from the Spirit than have the solemn definitions of ecumenical councils. The reception of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome entails the recognition of this specific ministry of the universal primate. We believe that this is a gift to be received by all the churches.

From a Catholic standpoint a paragraph like this one goes a long way towards meeting the concerns of non-Roman Catholics, even if the latter do not immediately recognize this.¹⁰ There is a welcome emphasis on collegiality, though as this is meant to be exercised mainly among the bishops, or even just among the primates of the different local and national churches, it cannot be equated with the participation of the whole people of God in the decision-making process. There is also what looks like a reassurance that the Pope never has any more authority than that of an ecumenical council, but as so often this conceals more than it reveals. Anglicans officially believe that such councils can and do make mistakes (Article 21), and might be inclined to regard such a statement as a renunciation of the papal claim to infallibility. Perhaps the Roman Catholic members of the commission can explain how they understand this, but they must know that they cannot dispute papal infallibility and remain in communion with the Pope. The only conclusion which can be drawn therefore is that for Roman Catholics the 'solemn declarations of ecumenical councils' are also infallible, something which Anglicans do not accept.¹²

It is perfectly clear from these paragraphs that there can be no communion with the Bishop of Rome without submission to his universal primacy, a 'gift to be received by all the churches'. Furthermore, this gift must be accepted on its own terms since, as the popular saying goes, you do not look a gift horse in the mouth! Roman Catholics cannot surrender their belief in the Pope's universal primacy in the interest of a reunited Christendom, since for them it is communion with the see of St Peter which guarantees the unity of the church in the first place. But on the other hand, disagreement on this point is the one thing which unites all other Christians, some of whom may have little else in common. We are not dealing here with a purely Anglican or Protestant matter, and to its credit that ARCIC report does not try to explain the reformed Church of England away by saying that it came into being for political or other non-theological reasons. Catholics may hold out the 'Petrine ministry' as a gift to the other churches, but they have to face the fact that other Christians do not want to accept it. Why not? If the Papacy is so valuable, why do other Christian bodies insist on doing without it?

This is the question which ultimately has to be answered, and it must be said that the commission has ducked the issue. In making the case for the reception of papal primacy it has not even tried to explain why Anglicans and other non-Roman Christians find it at best unnecessary and at worst unbiblical. On what, precisely, are the Roman claims founded? Here again, the commission has nothing to say, though there are some touching words from Pope John Paul II about his own sense of human frailty (p 35) as well as a reminder that no other see has ever made a comparable claim (p 38). But if other Christians are ever going to accept a universal primacy

based in Rome it will be essential to demonstrate that this is indeed the will of God expressed in Scripture, and it is very hard to see how this can be done with any credibility.

Of all the claims made for Peter, the one which is most probable in historical terms is the assertion that he was martyred at Rome sometime towards the end of Nero's reign (AD 68). No other city makes any claim to have been Peter's final resting place, and the existence of a shrine to him over his presumed grave is so ancient as to make it quite likely that the site is genuine. But that is the most that can be said from a historically objective standpoint. There is no indication that Peter founded the Roman Church, and it is hard to believe that he was in the city when Paul wrote to the Romans (about AD57) since if he had been, the letter would certainly have mentioned the fact. There is likewise no indication that he was ever the city's bishop, and the history of his immediate 'successors' is legendary at best. It must be remembered that this stands in sharp contrast to what we know of other churches at this time, where men like Polycarp and Ignatius exercised quasi-apostolic ministries without any reference to Rome at all.

When the Roman Church emerges from the shadows in the third century, it appears as a large and important see, as would befit the capital of a world empire, but it would be very difficult to argue that its bishops had any special status deriving from their supposed succession to Peter. That claim was not made with any seriousness until the late fourth century, after Rome had ceased to be the political centre of the empire, when there was a real danger that ecclesiastical primacy would follow the emperor in what was then rapidly becoming the state church. Rome played some part in the theological controversies of the ancient church, during which the classical formulations of orthodoxy were worked out, but it did not exercise any leadership role which would set it apart from and above the other churches. Here the ARCIC statement's references in paragraph 46 to Leo the Great's contribution to the Council of Chalcedon (451) and Gregory the Great's involvement in the conversion of England (597) are misleading to the point of dishonesty. It is certainly true that those popes did play a part in the events described, but countless other people did similar things, and nobody makes any claims of universal primacy on their behalf. Even in the West, the great names in theology – Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine – made their careers away from Rome and seem to have been little effected by that city's claims, even if they recognized its Petrine origins. Particularly revealing in this respect are Augustine's treatises against the Donatist schismatics in North Africa. One of his main arguments against them was that they were a local movement at odds with the universal church, but although he pressed home this theme relentlessly, he never suggested that the essence of their schism was that they were not in communion with the Bishop of Rome. Similarly Vincent of Lerins, the great definer of 'catholicism' stated that what is truly catholic is that which has been believed everywhere, by everyone at all times, not what has received the *imprimatur* of the Roman see.

The Papacy as we now know it did not originate in the New Testament but in the Cluniac reforms which began with the election of Pope Leo IX in 1046. Slowly the popes began to assert their authority over the princes of Western Europe, over the Byzantine Empire¹³ and over all other bishops. This claim was backed up by a highly efficient, centralized administrative structure which employed every means it could to gain more power. So strong did this bureaucracy become that nothing could break its power except internal schism, which occurred in 1378. Only when there were two (and occasionally three) rival popes was it possible for a local church to escape the Roman embrace. The nature of this crises was well understood at the

time, and one solution to it which might have worked was so-called 'conciliarism'. This created an embryonic constitutional structure along vaguely parliamentary lines, and tried to make the Papacy at least partially accountable to the wider church. Had this been allowed to develop in the way that the English parliamentary system eventually did, the church might have retained its unity and been more responsive to the challenges which faced it as the humanist renaissance began to take hold. Instead, the popes exercised their Petrine ministry in such a way that all attempts at democratization were frustrated, and by the end of the fifteenth century the institution was just as centralized (and in moral terms far more corrupt) than it had ever been.

The Reformation offered another chance to restructure the Papacy along more democratic lines, but not only was this option spurned, the Roman see used the sixteenth-century crises to increase its power among its depleted flock even further. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that at every point when its authority was challenged, the Papacy reacted by making even more extravagant claims for itself. This process culminated in 1870 when its loss of temporal power was accompanied by a dogmatic definition of papal infallibility! The Roman Catholic Church is today more defined by the Papacy than it has ever been, so much so in fact that the personal views of the Pope are frequently referred to by Catholic theologians, who either approve of them if they are conservative or else argue that a change of pope will bring about the changes needed to bring the Church into the modern world. Nobody stops to ask why the Pope's personal views are so important if, as the ARCIC report insists, he is little more than the mouthpiece of the collective will of the episcopate, which in turn does no more than restate traditional Christian positions in modern circumstances.

There is a vast credibility gap here which ARCIC has not even addressed, let alone resolved. But perhaps the answer is to be found in paragraph 61 which says of the Pope:

Such a universal primate will exercise leadership in the world and also in both communions, addressing them in a prophetic way. He will promote the common good in ways that are not constrained by sectional interests, and offer a continuing and distinctive teaching ministry, particularly in addressing difficult theological and moral issues.

So even if the entire college of bishops is ranged against him, the Pope need not feel constrained by 'sectional interests' and is free to utter his prophetic message, regardless of what anyone else might think about it. Anyone who thinks this view is alarmist need only look at some of the utterances of Pope John Paul II and the way they have been received by local Catholic churches around the world to see that all the talk about consultation and conciliarity means little when a genuine (or deeply felt) theological issue is at stake. Similarly, the following paragraph (62), which sums up what is expected of both Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the matter of the universal primacy speaks volumes. Anglicans must 'be open to and desire a recovery and re-reception under certain clear conditions [see the previous paragraph] of the exercise of universal primacy by the Bishop of Rome'. Roman Catholics must not complain if the Pope becomes stricter and more demanding, neither must they resent it if he decides to extend his pastoral care to those outside the Roman obedience. Anglicans, on the other hand, must be prepared to see their churches turned inside-out and virtually disappear in their present form. When this happens 'the web of unity which is woven from communion with God and reconciliation with each other

is extended and strengthened' (paragraph 63). What the statement fails to add, is that the chief beneficiary of this will be the spider whose web it is.¹⁴

Of course it is easy to point the finger at others and say that the Papacy has no basis for the claims which it tries to make. But is the Anglican Church any better off? There is no doubt that many of the Anglicans who have gone to Rome have done so because they want the kind of authoritative teaching which the Roman Catholic offers; for them, it is no exaggeration to say that the 'Petrine ministry' is a gift to the universal church. The Anglican Communion, by contrast, appears to be full of prelates who advertise their lack of belief, even their immorality, as acceptable (even desirable) stances. Who can believe in a Church whose leaders doubt the basic truths of the Christian faith, who welcome homosexual marriages and the like, and who persecute nobody except those who insist on defending traditional orthodoxy? Anglicans are in no position to throw stones here, and there are times when the orthodox among us have even been grateful for the Pope's firm stand against forms of liberalism to which many Anglican churches have caved in – the ordination of women being a prime example. Catholics can reasonably point out that the Anglican Communion is in a theological mess, and if they suggest that the 'Petrine ministry' is the way to solve this problem there are many who might be inclined to believe them. The ARCIC statement includes a paragraph (56) headed 'Issues facing Anglicans' which makes sobering reading in this respect. In particular, the sentence: 'To what extent does unilateral action by provinces or dioceses in matters concerning the whole Church, even after consultation has taken place, weaken *koinonia* [fellowship]?' opens up a whole series of questions which the Anglican Communion must address if it is to survive as a coherent entity. What Evangelicals want to say here is that the answer to the problems facing Anglicanism is not a re-reception of the universal primacy of the Pope, but repentance, conversion and a humble submission to the authority of Holy Scripture, which is the sole and final authority in matters of faith.

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Endnotes:

- 1) The words are quoted from *Authority in the Church II* 9 which appeared in 1981
- 2) Quoted on p 9 from *Authority in the Church I* 3 published in 1981
- 3) In fact, it means 'coming together', but the etymology may not be very significant. After all, 'method' comes from '*meta-hodos*' which could be said to mean 'with-way', but nobody is conscious of this now and it hardly affects the meaning of the word in everyday usage.
- 4) Did the fact that there were only two lay people on the commission, both of them women and one (the Roman Catholic) a nun, have anything to do with this.
- 5) For example, this was the issue between Jesus and the Jews when he cast out demons and healed people. The latter wanted to know who he was, to be able to claim such authority (John 5: 16-19; 8:13-30).

- 6) Unfortunately, and to our shame, we must admit that not all Anglicans are orthodox. Many, including a number of biblical scholars, would not accept that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and some might raise objections to the commission's statement on those grounds. It is therefore necessary to point out that there are still many Anglicans who do accept this high view of Scripture, and who believe that those who do not are out of line with the teaching of their church.
- 7) See Article 6 of the Thirty-nine Articles.
- 8) For much of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Anglicans were divided over the extent to which this cleansing process should be pursued, but they did not dispute the principle that non-Scriptural practices should be treated as secondary and dispensable.
- 9) This relationship is well-stated in para 20.
- 10) In fairness, it should be said that there are many Catholics who would like to see the Pope's primacy defined (and therefore limited) by a statement like this one.
- 11) The term 'infallibility' is used only once in the statement, and then in relation to the Church, not to the Pope (para 52). It remains to be seen what the latter will have to say about this.
- 12) It also raises the question of just which councils are ecumenical, and whether any should be recognized beyond the first four or the first seven, but the commission did not go into this.
- 13) Their behaviour towards the Byzantine Empire was particularly discreditable. For centuries the popes did all they could to share their gift of primacy with the Eastern Churches, with the result that even today Orthodox anti-Papists make their Western counterparts look like docile ecumenists by comparison.
- 14) This analogy may seem unkind, but it has been used before. In writing about the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Norman Davies compared it to a web, in which only the spider – Mikhail Gorbachov at that time – had any real freedom of movement. See N Davies *Heart of Europe* (Oxford: OUP 1986).