

# The Gift of Authority

General Synod Debate Friday 13 February 2004

After more than thirty years of conversations, official relations between the Anglican Communion and the Church of Rome are now almost at an all-time low. This is not because ARCIC (the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission) has not made considerable concessions to Roman Catholicism, whilst it has, but because of new developments, offensive to Rome, in some Anglican churches while the talks have been in progress – first the ordination and consecration of women priests and bishops, and now the consecration of an actively homosexual bishop in the USA and the solemnizing of homosexual unions in Canada. As a result, the Anglican co-chairman of ARCIC (Frank Griswold, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA) has had to resign, and plans for meetings have been suspended. Anglicans are very much on the defensive, and must not be tempted to make improper concessions as conciliatory gestures.

## **Background: the work of ARCIC and Rome's Reaction.**

The report now at last coming before the Synod, *The Gift of Authority*, was published in 1999. It was produced by ARCIC II, the commission set up in 1982 to continue the work of an earlier commission, ARCIC I, which was set up in 1970. ARCIC I produced a statement on the Eucharist, a statement on the Ministry, and two statements on Authority, which were all bound up in its *Final Report* of 1982. The statements on the Eucharist and the Ministry were unanimous, but the statements on Authority were not, because of the reservations of the Anglican members about the infallibility of the Pope and about the sinlessness and bodily assumption into heaven of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to which Roman Catholics are committed, following the authoritative promulgation of these dogmas in 1870, 1854 and 1950 respectively. The new third Authority statement, however, moves in a different direction from its predecessors, though it covers only the infallibility of the Pope and not the Marian dogmas, which are reserved for future treatment.

The first of ARCIC II's agreed statements was on justification, and appeared in 1987 under the title *Salvation and the Church*. Following the lead given by the adventurous Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng, it treated justification in a manner much more favourable to Reformation (and Pauline) teaching than Rome has traditionally done. The next year, however, the statement was condemned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at Rome in a reply called *Observations*, which called for the statement to be revised and brought into conformity with the teaching of the (Counter-Reformation) Council of Trent. This was only a few months after a friendly reception had been given to ARCIC's work by the 1998 Lambeth Conference. In 1991 the Congregation followed this up with a reply to the *Final Report* of ARCIC I, entitled *Response of the Holy See*, calling for the report to be revised and brought into complete conformity with the teaching of Trent and Vatican I, and for Anglican reservations about Roman teaching to be dropped. (Vatican I must not be confused with Vatican II, but is the council which in 1870 promulgated the dogma of papal infallibility. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is the old Holy Office of Inquisition, and is the most important of the advisory committees surrounding the Pope: it is chaired by Cardinal Ratzinger, and responsible also for the intransigent statement of Roman claims *Dominus Iesus*, issued in the year 2000).

## **The Anglican Change of Policy.**

Faced, now, with the realisation that Rome was interested in nothing except surrender, the Anglican members of ARCIC seem to have made an astonishing decision, which was to give Rome what it was demanding. In 1993 they published a report called *Clarifications*, which has not come before the Synod, but which responds to the Congregation's criticisms of the ARCIC I's statements on the Eucharist and Ministry by claiming that Anglicans agree with the Roman doctrines of transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass. *The Gift of Authority* reflects the same revolution of policy, and not only withdraws the Anglican objections to papal infallibility, but

proposes that, even in their separated state, Anglicans should accept the authority of the Pope (sections 60-63).

The reception of *The Gift of Authority* by informed Anglicans has naturally been pretty critical. Colin Buchanan's booklet *Is Papal Authority a Gift to Us?* (Grove Books) and Martin Davie's article 'Yes and No' in the FOAG symposium *Unpacking the Gift* (Church House Publishing) are particularly penetrating critiques.

### **The Motions before Synod.**

The motions before General Synod (items 23 & 24) do not in any way commit the Synod or the Church of England to the report and they raise difficult issues that must be dealt with by ARCIC.

What is particularly unusual and refreshing is the requirement in paragraph (g) that ecumenical dialogue be consistent with the 'Anglican inheritance of faith'. The failure of ARCIC to do this has caused much discontent in the past. The problem is that *The Gift of Authority* is at odds with the doctrine of the Church of England and several parts of the motion reflect this as explained below.

Paragraph (e) of the motion refers to the teaching of Vatican I that the Pope has the right to intervene uninvited in the affairs of any diocese in the world. This is contrary, of course, to the Church of England's Article 37 that states succinctly 'The Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England'. It should also be remembered that there is no evidence that the Church of Rome was anything more than a large and respected church until the fifth century, nor is there evidence that Peter was the founder of the Church of Rome or ever its Bishop. ARCIC has always ignored the fallacious claims of the papacy.

Paragraph (f) addresses the idea of infallibility. ARCIC appears to accept that in certain circumstances the Church can teach infallibly (without error) but it does not spell out what these circumstances might be. There are tensions in the Church of Rome itself on this issue. However, our 'Anglican inheritance of faith' is very clear, no Church can make such exalted claims (see Articles 19-21). Synods can and do err and therefore the Church is always under the authority of God's word written, never above it. Paragraph (g) may also allude to the 1984 *Dublin Agreed Statement* of the Anglican-Orthodox Commission, in which paragraphs 28-30 state that both Anglicans and Orthodox reject papal infallibility.

Paragraph (c) may also reflect the tension within Roman Catholicism over authority. The post-Vatican II focus has been much more on the synodical nature of the Church. However, for Anglicans true church is not defined by institutions or methods of government but by faith, the preaching of the pure Word of God and the right administration of the Sacraments (Article 19).

Paragraph (a) is standard ecumenical speak but paragraphs (b) and (d) are curious. Paragraph (b) affirms that ARCIC has played a significant role in the search for unity. However, there is clear frustration today that 30 years of talk has produced so little. This frustration has led to a new approach to ecumenism; the 'just do it' approach. Instead of trying to remove the barriers to union the idea is to work together and then look at the barriers. This is the approach advocated in paragraph (d). It is the approach now being pursued in Anglican-Methodist dialogue and it may work because, on the whole, the Methodist Church has shown a willingness to abandon all it once stood for. However, it cannot work with Roman Catholics. Statements from the Vatican, such as *Dominus Iesus* and *Observations*, have shown that whatever may have been achieved at a local level or whatever the private view of some Catholic ecumenists, the Vatican has only one approach to ecumenical dialogue - unconditional surrender.

In the face of these various issues it is vital to affirm our commitment to the Anglican inheritance of faith as set out in paragraph (g). In doing so we are saying very clearly that the Church of England is a reformed catholic Church and those hard won reforms must not be thrown away.

# APPENDIX - SYNOD RESOLUTION

## THE GIFT OF AUTHORITY: Report by the Council for Christian Unity (GS 1532)

*The Bishop of Peterborough* to move:

22. 'That the Synod do take note of this Report.'
23. 'That this Synod,:
  - (a) re-affirm the Church of England's commitment to work with all its ecumenical partners towards the full visible unity of the Church of Christ;
  - (b) recognise the significant role of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) and the International Anglican–Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM) in progressing the search for unity;
  - (c) welcome the witness of *The Gift of Authority* that 'authority rightly exercised is a gift of God to bring reconciliation and peace to humankind' and its emphasis on the synodical nature of the Church as the form in which 'believers and churches are held together in communion';
  - (d) acknowledge that differing convictions about issues of authority are best explored in the context of shared church life and collaboration in mission;
  - (e) believing that any search for theological agreement on universal primacy requires that the contested claim of universal, ordinary and immediate jurisdiction for the Bishop of Rome be resolved, and noting that *The Gift of Authority* does not refer to this issue, request that it again form part of the agenda of ARCIC;
  - (f) observing that *The Gift of Authority's* treatment of the teaching authority of the Bishop of Rome is not sufficiently clear, request that ARCIC clarify in what sense this is 'a gift to be received by all the churches'; and
  - (g) affirm that ecumenical texts agreed by Anglicans should be consistent with the Anglican inheritance of faith and with what has been agreed with other ecumenical partners.'

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