Mission, Bishops and the Size of Dioceses

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I HAVE been asked by the Editor to write a general article on the exercise of *episcope*—that is to say, the good ordering of dioceses under episcopal administration—but with special reference to the *size* of dioceses that modern conditions might dictate. And to do this having in mind by way of illustration a concrete example as it appears from the recent *Report of the Bishop of Oxford's Working Party on the Division of the Diocese*. I must make it clear—should it be necessary—that I have no brief to advise the Diocese of Oxford and that my sole information is the published report itself. That report, with one dissentient, came out against division, a decision that has since been overwhelmingly endorsed by the Oxford Diocesan Conference, in March this year. The Oxford Report, so far as this article goes, is no more than a hook on which to hang a general issue now being raised in the Church of England, and which is currently being studied by a working-party set up by the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry, in pursuance of a unanimous resolution of the Church Assembly in February, 1968. That resolution read:

> 'That A.C.C.M. be instructed to consider and report on the pastoral relationship of diocesan, suffragan and assistant bishops to the clergy and laity of their dioceses with a view to ascertaining the factors relating to the most appropriate size of a diocese and giving further consideration to the alternative scheme for small dioceses in Chapter XIV of the Report *Diocesan Boundaries*.'

It is clear from this resolution that there is a history to the Assembly's decision. It is a rather complex one. As the resolution indicates, there has been an earlier report of a commission under the chairmanship of Sir John Arbuthnot (published by the Church Information Office under the title *Diocesan Boundaries*—C.A.1653) that had been set up in 1965 with the agreement of the eleven dioceses in London and the South-East of England 'to recommend, in the light of present conditions and of plans which may reasonably be expected to be carried out for

the development of the South-East and its component areas, what is likely to be the best organization of the Church by dioceses'. The dioceses concerned were those of Canterbury, Chelmsford, Chichester, Guildford, London, Oxford, Portsmouth, St. Albans, Southwark, Winchester and Rochester.

The Arbuthnot Commission laboured under an enormous term of reference, that included a qualifying condition that 'they should take in view an alternative of smaller dioceses . . . in the event of the adoption of a general policy of making them smaller'. The Commission was faithful to this clause, but it inevitably meant an indecisive report—in fact, virtually, two reports, the 'larger dioceses scheme' and 'a possible scheme for smaller dioceses', as the appended maps term them, without advancing positive guidance on which was preferable. It had done useful work in clarifying the problem, but ended in doing little more than restating it. The Church Assembly discussed the Arbuthnot Report in November 1967, and the debate made clear that it was not only in London and the South-East that the size of diocese in relation to the bishop's proper work needed investigation, but in many other parts of the country as well. It was a general problem that had been unearthed. And hence it was that the resumed debate in February 1968 led to the setting up of the Working Party on Bishops, as it has come to be called, on the resolution quoted above, that was moved by Mr. G. E. Duffield of Oxford.

The reader might be forgiven for thinking that this is a tedious story of procrastination. In fact, the inevitable delay occasioned by this succession of reports, debates, and the setting up of a further working-party has served the Church well. It has allowed and is allowing thought to mature and new questions to be asked as deeper levels of the problem of *episcope*, of good overall planning, are disclosed. And very important, it allows the Church to take into account the proposals of the Government White Paper published in February this year on *Reform of Local Government in England*, following the Redcliffe-Maud Report. Substantially the White Paper proposes the division of the country, outside Greater London (which has already been reorganized under the London Government Act of 1963), into 51 'unitary areas' 'with populations of not much less than 250,000 and not much more than 1,000,000, in which a single authority would exercise all local government functions', and 5 'metroplitan areas' with two-tier administration, namely . . . Merseyside, South-East Lancashire & North-East Cheshire, West Midlands, West Yorkshire and South Hampshire. And the whole, unitary and metropolitan areas, would probably be grouped into eight provinces, each with a provincial council, though decisions on this await the Commission on the Constitution which has not yet reported.

The White Paper makes clear what the major areas of social administration, the 'zones humaines', the 'natural groupings' of the new

England will be, and asserts that 'the Government believe that a Bill to introduce the new system should be brought before Parliament in the 1971/72 session'. There is no doubt that this massive reorganisation will involve considerable surgery and considerable pain to the civil body, but making allowances for minor details about where exact lines will be drawn, there seems little doubt that the reforms will go forward. And certainly they will tidy up the map of England after a period of immense population movement and make for more efficient local government.

The question facing the Church is whether she should reorganise her own administrative areas, her own areas of *episcope*, her own dioceses—and in due course, provinces—to be conterminous with the civil ones. If she does there would be some slight increase in the number of dioceses through the division of the larger rural counties, but the general question of whether there should be an overall movement towards 'small dioceses' will have been firmly answered in the negative. Indeed, the urban dioceses, already vast in population would become vaster still—notably those in the 'metropolitan areas', and those in the South-East of England, partly in response to demographic factors such as natural increase of population and the drift to the larger urban centres, and partly to the probable subsequent redrawing of the boundaries of such dioceses to take in the growing commuter fringes. Such would be the logic of coincidence of dioceses with the 'zones humaines' of civil administration. The present Oxford Diocese, for example, on which we have hung some of this thinking, will see an increase in population from 316,000 in 1961 to 450,000 in 1981 through this process.

In the face of great expansions of urban and 'ex-urban' populations, the growth of connurbations and new towns, not to speak of the relentless secularisation of society, the instinct of the Church for smaller dioceses is understandable. Those who so agree adduce many justifications . . . the remoteness of the bishop of the diocese, his inability to be a real 'father-in-God' in the large diocese, the need of clergy for closer episcopal support as the job becomes tougher, the theological impropriety—as it is alleged by purists, of multiplying suffragan bishops as a 'solution' (there are now 51 suffragan bishops and 43 assistant bishops alongside 43 diocesans). And so on. . . . And not least, if a minor matter, is the quite intolerable position that suffragans can find themselves in as mere episcopal curates, men who have been visibly selected for their proven ability, often cut off from the battlefield, without having the authority to influence either the strategy or the troops. At a stroke, it is argued, all these problems might disappear with the proliferation of small dioceses, and all the components of *episcope* might once again coalesce in a single Chief Pastor.

To the Church of England, with her native paternalism, and her taste for what she holds to be primitive practice, the case for the small

diocese can indeed be plausible. We have seen that should the Church devise dioceses to be conterminous with the administrative areas visualised in the White Paper, there would be some increase in the number of dioceses—which would meet some of the problems of very large rural dioceses. But the small diocese cannot be a solution in the large urban areas, the connurbations, the metropolitan areas with wide commuter fringes . . . where dividing lines would run artificially through heavily populated areas that the civil authority treated as a unity. To do so would be to sin against every canon of good sociological planning. It would matter less if a diocese were no more than the sum total of its separate parishes—as indeed, many—and bishops, may think. Or if a city area were no more than the sum total of its boroughs and wards—as many parochially-minded town councillors seem to think. But it fails to see that the task of the Church in a complex society and a radical mission situation cannot be exhausted in the building up of the churches in territorial parishes, essential though that is. It fails to see that the Church has to encounter and try to bring influence on the social forces at work in society, upon social structures and institutions—the 'principalities and powers' of modern society—which cannot be tied down in small static areas. The exercise of sophisticated mission requires planning areas large enough to contain the structural forces at work in society, large enough to reach to the periphery of the areas in which those forces operate.

Sociological criteria, that is to say, should determine the size and shape of the dioceses, and always in the light of the Church's mission to the world. The Lambeth Conference Report of 1969 has a word on the subject:

> 'In determining the size and structure of a diocese two factors have to be borne in mind. The first is that the Church must minister relevantly to men in their secular community. The second is that the Church must be a family in which bishop and people can know and love each other. It may be that some dioceses will of necessity be too large for one bishop alone to be an effective father in God to all his people. In such cases he will share his responsibility with a coadjutor, suffragan, or assistant bishop. Such a colleague should exercise all episcopal functions and have an equal place in the Councils of the Church.'

Allowing for a certain conventionality of phrase and that the bishop can never know 'all his people', the point is made that the sociological realities of the secular community is the first factor in determining the size of a diocese. There *will* be a tension between the need for pastoral care of the churches and the demands of sophisticated mission to social structures, but whereas the large diocese permits the latter and can ensure the former through delegation and a skilful infra-structure of the diocese, the small diocese—certainly in the connurbations—can only secure the former.

Once the case for the 'larger dioceses' alternative is conceded, the character of *episcope*, the organisation and structure of episcopal leadership becomes a crucial question. By definition the area is too large for a single bishop. We have noted the present unsatisfactory 'solution' through suffragans. So what? The solution is surely in a genuinely collegial team of bishops in a diocese, even if one of them is a *primus inter pares*, each responsible for a geographical area where sociological criteria allow some kind of sensible division, but—what is more important—each responsible for some specialized function *over the whole diocese*. Several dioceses are now deciding to make some kind of territorial division, including both Oxford and London, and it will be interesting to see how they work out. It would certainly meet the need for closer pastoral care of the parishes. But it could be at the cost of overlooking some of the specialized functions of *episcope* that may need the *whole* diocese as an operative framework. And perhaps more seriously, it could overlook the range of function, the specialised knowledge and skills now required in *episcope* that might be contained, or sufficiently contained, within a collegial team—if they were chosen intelligently (though that is another intriguing question)—but which are quite unlikely to be embodied in any *one* man, even if he had the time to exercise them. This is the strongest argument now for a collegial episcopate in a diocese, justified by the sheer complexity of the Church's mission in a very complex society.

Let us consider some of the varied and exacting demands now made upon good *episcope*, and in the radical missionary situation we are now in. . . . There is the massive on-going task of providing, equipping and supporting men in 'the care of all the churches'—a task that would go far beyond the current expectations of pastoral care if we were willing to grasp the concept of the missionary parish, and work at a missionary strategy for the parish that allowed for 'para-churches', 'churches without walls', more indigenous and less stylized expressions of the Christian community that could reach out and involve those on the periphary and outside the traditional churches. And there are a lot of such people. An episcopal church, that claims to secure diversity in unity through bishops ought to have a special *penchant* and flair for such developments. Certainly experiments in the missionary parish are desperately important, and the best pastoral care that bishops can give to the parishes is to help them in their mission. . . . Then there is the ministry and mission to the 'principalities and powers', the social structures that determine so markedly for good or ill the quality of life, of men and of society . . . local Government and political groups, the social services, the educational structures, industrial organizations, the world of entertainment and the mass-media. . . . There are the enormous opportunities presented by the developments of 'community care', 'countervailing power', 'participation', in which the Church has a part to play, understanding, participating, and initiating. . . . All of

these are areas of mission in modern society, dependent on able ministry and an active laity—and it is an episcopal responsibility to help them forward and to ensure that they happen. . . . And always there must be *time*—for people, for reflection, for theological wrestling if Christianity is to make sense in a secular age, perhaps even the word of prophecy. . . .

Of course bishops cannot do all these things themselves, but it is the task and duty of bishops to know what things have to be done, and through planning, delegation and surveillance, to ensure that they are done as well as possible. They have their own personal contributions to make themselves—and there are some roles and tasks that they are best placed to fulfil—but essentially they are *enablers* of the Church. And if the Church's mission requires essential things to be done that are not being done and many of them rather new and difficult, there must be contained within the *leadership* itself sufficient understanding of what is entailed. And quite simply, they go beyond the capacity of any single man.

This is the real case for the collegial episcopate in the diocese, and there is no doubt it would be imperative were the Church to be seriously organised for her contemporary mission to the world. And unless mission has such dimension it hardly matters whether dioceses are large or small, the shapes and areas of dioceses appropriate or not, bishops one or several . . . the operation would go on, but it would be less than mission. On the other hand, there could be impeccable diocesan shapes and episcopal structures, without serious mission orientation. This is the real issue facing the Church, underlying any considerations of changes in diocesan structures—whether the Church can be continued in terms of mission to the world, and *episcope* therefore in terms of geuine apostolicity.