Comment: *The Gift of Authority*

The Gift of Authority, the third agreed statement from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission to address the question of authority in the Church (Catholic Truth Society, London, 1999), is offered for 'study, reflection, and response', in the belief that it presents 'both challenge and hope in what has been one of the most difficult aspects of our mutual dialogue'.

Challenge certainly, and hope against hope. According to the co-chairmen (Cormac Murphy-O'Connor and Mark Santer, bishops of Arundel and Brighton and of Birmingham respectively), in their opening sentence, this statement is a contribution to the latest stage in the 'earnest search for full visible communion between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church' which was initiated in 1966 by Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI. *In illo tempore*, it is perhaps worth recalling, nothing less than 'complete communion of faith and sacramental life' was envisaged, between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. As was only prudent, no time scale was prescribed or even suggested: the 'unity in truth and faith for which Christ prayed' would come in God's good time, as a moment of grace which could not be predicted let alone scheduled by ecclesiastical authorities or ecumenical commissions; but, as those who lived in these heady years recall, many people expected to see sacramental communion between Canterbury and Rome restored long before the end of the millennium. With hindsight, of course, those (on both sides) who were pessimistic at the time, or 'realistic' (as they might have said), or simply anti-ecumenical (consciously or otherwise), have been vindicated.

In 1989, after the ordination of women as priests and bishops in some provinces of the Anglican Communion, when Archbishop Robert Runcie and Pope John Paul II met in Rome, they acknowledged this new obstacle, but reaffirmed their commitment to the 'restoration of visible unity and full ecclesial communion'. At the time, and certainly in the decade since, both Canterbury and Rome have been severely strained to maintain such unity as there is within their own respective churches, without having to face the practicalities of restoring communion between them. The recent Lambeth Conference displayed very deep disagreements within the Anglican communion, on a number of doctrinal issues — disagreements which could easily be church-dividing and which, anyway, will not be easy to resolve. On the Roman Catholic side, Pope John Paul II's decades of increasingly heroic journeys display an increasingly desperate

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determination to keep Catholics united and in communion with Rome. As always, if Rome insists so strongly on unity, it is not because Catholics are already securely united but on the contrary: in many parts of the world, we teeter all the time on the edge of schism. In the cold light of realism, you might think, it looks as if the 'gift of authority' invested in the 'universal primacy', described in this new ARCIC statement, barely suffices to maintain unity within the Roman Catholic Church — let alone to integrate the Anglican Communion.

This new ARCIC statement insists, with the two previous ARCIC statements on authority in the Church, that the universal primate exercises his ministry 'in collegial association with the other bishops' and not in ways that 'supplant the exercise of *episcope* in local churches'. For Catholics, these points were of course clearly made in 1870, in the dogmatic constitution 'Pastor Aeternus' of Vatican I — with whatever effect. At the theoretical level, this statement reproduces Vatican I's conception of papal jurisdiction, in all essentials. It is stated, quite explicitly, that the primacy of the Bishop of Rome includes a 'specific ministry' which — 'in certain circumstances' — gives him the 'duty to discern and make explicit' 'the authentic faith of the whole Church, that is, the faith proclaimed from the beginning' (§ 47).

The most remarkable aspect of the new statement is that the Commission considers there is now 'sufficient agreement on universal primacy as a gift to be shared' for them to propose that 'such a primacy could be offered and received even before our churches are in full communion' (§ 60). In other words, the Anglican Communion would, could, or should, acknowledge the primacy of the Pope *before* the restoration of eucharistic communion. But the nub of the matter is, unmistakably, that the Anglican Communion is thought to be ready, theologically, to accept the ministry of the Bishop of Rome.

More obscurely, however, or perhaps prophetically, Roman Catholics are invited, as they 'offer' papal primacy (to Anglicans) as a 'ministry to the whole Church of God', to 'be open to and desire a re-reception of the exercise of primacy by the Bishop of Rome' — because, correlatively, Anglicans are encouraged (as they accept this 'gift') to 'be open to and desire a recovery and re-reception *under certain clear conditions* of the exercise of universal primacy by the Bishop of Rome' (§ 62 — my italics). Anglicans are famous for fudge and fuzzy thinking, or so Roman Catholics believe. At the next stage, in this 're-reception' of the 'exercise' of papal primacy, we may be surprised at how precise, explicit and unambiguous the Anglicans will be, defining these 'clear conditions'. They had better be.

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