

# **The Venice Statement: Disestablishing a Church and Reforming the Papacy? Fergus Kerr OP**

The Venice Statement on Authority in the Church is a momentous document which it must take some years for us to digest. Starting from "the large measure of agreement in faith which exists between the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Anglican Communion", acknowledged in the Malta Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission (1968), the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission has succeeded, in less than ten years, in reaching a significant consensus on the doctrine of the Eucharist (Windsor 1971) and of the Ministry (Canterbury 1973), and now on the question of the nature and exercise of Authority in the Church.

This final document closes a phase. It must surely force Roman Catholics in this country to search their hearts more deeply than ever about how true this series of Agreed Statements is to what they believe, and to ask themselves how far what they believe may be illuminated and purified, in the light of faith, by study of these documents. As a community, we are not accustomed to theological argument, and the documents are in any case much more difficult to read than they appear at first sight. They are immensely rich, opening up perspectives and introducing new concepts which it would stretch the mind of theological students to understand. It has been easy enough for us to delay the effort of settling doubts and resolving difficulties raised by the first two documents because we naturally waited to see if agreement would be reached on the question of the primacy of the Pope. If agreement could not be attained on that question, so we could excuse ourselves, then we did not need to struggle with the unaccustomed language of the previous agreements. It was never a good excuse, for the documents have been offered to us all along as part of our theological education, and would have great value in that respect whatever the ecumenical outcome. They are part of the dissemination of Vatican II theology. But a con-

sensus has now been reached on the Roman primacy, and there is no way of delaying our response any longer. As the Co-Chairmen write in the Preface: "The consensus we have reached, if it is to be accepted by our two communities, would have, we insist, important consequences. Common recognition of Roman primacy would bring changes not only to the Anglican Communion but also to the Roman Catholic Church".

The Statement may, therefore, be read for hints as to what sort of changes might be brought about. The Preface itself mentions some, which seem to bear, explicitly at least, far more on the Roman Catholic Church than on the Anglican Communion. So far as the latter is concerned the changes envisaged sound remarkably vague: "Communion with the see of Rome would bring to the churches of the Anglican Communion not only a wider *koinonia* but also a strengthening of the power to realise its traditional ideal of diversity in unity". Changes on the Roman Catholic part; however, would be a good deal more specific: "Roman Catholics, on their side, would be enriched by the presence of a particular tradition of spirituality and scholarship, the lack of which has deprived the Roman Catholic Church of a precious element in the Christian heritage. The Roman Catholic Church has much to learn from the Anglican synodical tradition of involving the laity in the life and mission of the Church". In exchange for a fresh infusion of Anglican spirituality and scholarship, together with major changes in church government in favour of lay participation, the Roman Catholic Church would provide a larger communion for Anglicans and strengthen Anglican power to realize their ideal of diversity in unity. How, one wonders, would association with the Vatican achieve the latter? Does anything sound less likely, given the Vatican's traditional power to keep diversity to a minimum? Or are we to envisage very far-reaching changes in the exercise of the authority of the Roman pontiff? That, in fact, seems to be the case, as a perusal of the Statement with this in mind soon reveals.

First, however, one cannot forbear to mention the admission in the Preface that "we have not been able to resolve some of the difficulties of Anglicans concerning Roman Catholic belief relating to the office of the bishop of Rome". These are the four problems listed later on in the Statement (par 24): the weight to be placed on the Petrine texts, the "divine right" of the papacy, papal infallibility, and universal immediate jurisdiction. The authors of the Statement are surely not too optimistic in thinking that, despite these problems, they have achieved "a significant convergence with far-reaching consequences" (par 25), which allows these

problems to be placed “in a proper perspective” (Preface). What remains strangely neglected, however, in a document on Authority in the Church, is the difficulty which Roman Catholics, at least in England, have with Anglican belief and practice regarding the place of the monarch.

It has always been the great strength of ARCIC that it drew its members from more than merely English Catholicism on the one hand and the Church of England on the other. The Catholic representatives were chosen from various parts of the world, while Anglican participants came from Ireland, Canada, Australia, South Africa and the United States as well as from England. Others must consider, in parts of the world where churches of the Anglican Communion are not “established”, what the implications are for future relations between our churches of this “doctrinal convergence” (par 25) to which the Venice Statement bears witness. If it appears, upon due reflection and in the judgment of our respective authorities, that this set of Statements does express “a unity at the level of faith which not only justifies but requires action to bring about a closer sharing between our two communions in life, worship and mission” (par 26), then the action indicated must take account of the very different relations that exist at present, say, between the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church in Scotland, and the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. On the ground, so to speak, and in the given historical and social conjuncture, no two situations could be more different.

If it is true to say that “it was precisely in the problem of papal primacy that our historical divisions found their unhappy origin” (Preface), it is surely equally valid to refer to the Act of Supremacy. The monarch, since 1559, has been “the only supreme governor of this realm ... as well in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal”. It has been characteristic of the Church of England from the beginning—in theory, as Hooker shows, as well as in practice—to subordinate ecclesiastical to secular power. Over the generations, this has created a system of patronage, and a certain ethos, perhaps easiest to caricature in the squirearchy, the parsonical voice, and some of the customs of the ancient universities—a phenomenon which is imponderably but unmistakably “Anglican”. It is surely this (admittedly mitigated) Erastianism, on the part of the Church of England, that constitutes the greatest single difficulty for English Roman Catholics when they contemplate the prospect of communion between Westminster and Lambeth.

Very few Catholics from other parts of the world seem able to

understand the deep-seated repugnance (not to mince matters) which this aspect of the Church of England evokes on the part of many English (not to mention Welsh, Irish and Scottish) Roman Catholics. Indeed, paradoxically enough, many visiting Catholics are often charmed by the splendid decor and apparently harmless eccentricity of the Anglican "Erastianism". It is surely only fair to say that, for many of us who have to live with it, the changes that common recognition of Roman primacy would bring to the Anglican Communion would have to include the undoing of the Act of Supremacy—but that, in turn, would only be the beginning of an unravelling of the whole texture of Anglicanism as the "national Church". It would require deep and far-reaching social and intellectual and emotional changes that would surely take more than a single generation. The whole ethos of the Church of England would have to change—and in the process, perhaps, much of what is so attractive about Anglicanism would vanish. Roman Catholics in England are fundamentally a community of *dissenters*, and the mistake that continues to be made, by ecumenists here as well as our brethren abroad, is to underestimate greatly this stubborn and complex factor.

The changes that the Venice Statement envisages on the Roman Catholic side would, however, be equally radical and far-reaching. We are invited to remember, for example, that "the perception of God's will for his Church does not belong only to the ordained ministry but is shared by all its members" (par 6). The authority of the Lord Jesus Christ is declared, so we are told, through a "continuing process of discernment and response, in which the faith is expressed and the gospel is pastorally applied" (ibid). While ordained ministers—bishops and a fortiori the Pope—are commissioned to discern our insights and give authoritative expression to them, "the community, for its part, must respond to and *assess* (my italics) the insights and teachings of the ordained ministers" (ibid). Again, "A substantial part in the process of reception is played ... by the response of the faithful", i.e. in the acceptance of conciliar definitions and disciplinary decisions (par 16). While the bishops have a special responsibility for promoting truth and discerning error, "the *interaction* (my italics) of bishop and people in its exercise is a safe-guard of Christian life and fidelity" (par 18). This no doubt corresponds to our experience; it has seldom been better said in recent times.

What must surely startle—and perhaps relieve and even delight—many Roman Catholics is the full and frank criticism, in the Venice Statement, of the theory and practice of the Roman primacy, not only in the past but, by clear implication, at the present

time as well. Starting with a very general pronouncement—"The authorities in the Church cannot adequately reflect Christ's authority because they are still subject to the limitations and sinfulness of human nature" (par 7)—the Venice Statement becomes increasingly particular: "The theological interpretation of this primacy and the administrative structures through which it has been exercised have varied considerably through the centuries. Neither theory nor practice, however, has ever fully reflected these ideals. Sometimes functions assumed by the see of Rome were not necessarily linked to the primacy: sometimes the conduct of the occupant of this see has been unworthy of his office: sometimes the image of this office has been obscured by interpretations placed upon it" (par 12). A little further on we read as follows (the pope as one of the bishops is certainly included here): "there is no guarantee that those who have an everyday responsibility will—any more than other members—invariably be free from errors of judgment, will never tolerate abuses, and will never distort the truth" (par 18).

In connection with the papacy itself several strong statements are made which, by implication, rule out wild interpretations of papal primacy but also criticize ways in which that primacy has been, and still is, exercised. In the former category we find the following statement: the idea is precluded that "the pope is an inspired oracle communicating fresh revelation, or that he can speak independently of his fellow bishops and the Church, or on matters not concerning faith or morals" (par 24). More remarkable, however, is this comment: "the First Vatican Council intended that the papal primacy should be exercised only to maintain and never to erode the structures of the local churches" (par 24). Is this an instance in which, to quote the Preface, "the Church has often failed to achieve this ideal?" We are informed that the Church today is "seeking to replace the juridical outlook of the nineteenth century by a more pastoral understanding of authority in the Church" (*ibid*). This admission that a "juridical outlook" lingers on, and that it is not "pastoral", must surely be welcomed.

Paragraph 21 deserves to be quoted in extenso; it certainly contains the most severe criticism of the papacy: "Primacy fulfils its purpose by helping the churches to listen to one another, to grow in love and unity, and to strive together towards the fullness of Christian life and witness; it respects and promotes Christian freedom and spontaneity; it does not seek uniformity where diversity is legitimate, or centralize administration to the detriment of local churches. A primate exercise his ministry not in iso-

lation but in collegial association with his brother bishops. His intervention in the affairs of a local church should not be made in such a way as to usurp the responsibility of its bishop". From this paragraph it seems fair to conclude that a primate may indeed "intervene in the affairs of a local church"—which is all to the good, because the Venice Statement as a whole stresses the importance of the local church and those who live in a local church which is a stagnant backwater may sometimes be glad of initiatives from elsewhere and it is important to remember the creative role of the Roman see in recent times. On the other hand, the language, so reminiscent of I Corinthians XIII, clearly indicates the *failures*. It is not unknown for a primate to intervene in the affairs of a local church in such a way as to *usurp* the responsibility of its bishop. There would be no point in saying that a primate exercises his ministry not in isolation but in collegial association with his brother bishops unless there were instances of his acting precisely in isolation—instances, at any rate, when it appeared that he was doing so. There would be no point in saying that the papacy does not seek uniformity where diversity is legitimate unless it had on occasion done so. There would be no point in saying that the papacy should not centralize administration to the detriment of local churches unless there was reason to think that it had sometimes done so. This picture of the ideal "primate" is clearly a "summons to reform" (par 7) the existing primacy. The Venice Statement, in fact, seems to envisage very far-reaching changes at the Vatican. It will be for each man to judge for himself how far the actual is from the ideal in this respect, but is it very unjust to feel a jolt of surprise at the notion of the papacy's being required to "respect and promote Christian freedom and spontaneity?" That will be the day, one is inclined to say, when Catholics think of the Vatican in terms of Christian freedom and spontaneity, instead of caution and conservatism or worse.

Far be it from me to question either the necessity or the possibility of radically reforming the Vatican. It would be mindless complacency to say that it needs no reform and mere cynicism to doubt that it is possible. On the other hand, is it not our conviction as Roman Catholics that the institution of the papacy has been God-given providentially and that it has proved its worth, despite all the abuses and failings? In his edition of the text of the Venice Statement Julian Charley, one of the Anglican members of ARCIC, writes as follows: "The idea of paragraph 21 has not yet been convincingly demonstrated to those who are not Roman Catholics" (page 25). Does that mean that he, and Anglicans of like mind, will wait until the ideal of primacy outlined

in paragraph 21 of the Venice Statement is actually realized before they take steps towards unity with the see of Rome? Does that not mean they will have to wait for ever? Once it is admitted that there is to be a primacy, then, while the existing institutions of the Vatican should certainly be radically reformed, and the pretensions of papal bureaucrats exploded, the fact remains that the primate would always require an office and a staff of some kind, which means that there must be some degree of human inertia, bungling, jobbery, machination, and the rest. There will never be a perfect papacy, in that sense, any more than there can ever be a perfect Church. In a tradition in which Paul had to outface Peter, and where the function of a Catherine of Siena is as essential as the Petrine office, and where the *interaction* of bishop and people in its exercise is perhaps the best safeguard of Christian life and fidelity, the see of Rome would surely continue to be the principal centre in matters concerning the Church universal without having to be occupied permanently by a species of singularly self-effacing saint. The response of the community to authority must always be discerning, and that will sometimes mean being critical and even resistant. It is not condoning the worst excesses of Vatican autocracy—for example in the Modernist period—to argue that, after all, it is in the rough and tumble of real life that our faith finds the true Church and that we recognize the institutions providentially established to serve us on the way. Isn't it because the papacy is not the *only* such institution, and finally never even the most important one in ordinary Catholic experience, and because all such institutions are in any case always secondary, that we can accept the primacy of the see of Rome, with all its limitations and sinfulness? As the Venice Statement itself so finely says (par 18): "in Christian hope, we are confident that such failures cannot destroy the Church's ability to proclaim the gospel and to show forth the Christian life; for we believe that Christ will not desert his Church and that the Holy Spirit will lead it into all truth." That is why the Church, in spite of its failures in and by the institutions which make the Church visible will always be corrected by Christ's unfailing promise. We may surely hope that the history of the papacy has reached another turning-point and that a long overdue disburdening of powers and privileges will at last take place. This would be bound, however, to fall far short of some people's starry-eyed ideals. The time might then be ripe for the churches of the Anglican Communion to seek communion with the see of Rome. The question is whether it will take as long to reform the Vatican as to disestablish the Church of England.