

Comment

Not many of our readers will have been startled by the view of the papacy put forward in the recent Statement by the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission:¹ the Pope as some sort of absolute monarch has long since disappeared from Catholic consciousness. (Not for so long as some of us would like to pretend; but anyway we can all now cheerfully subscribe to a view that puts the papacy in its full ecclesial context, and it is satisfactory to find that this raises no serious problem for at least these particular Anglicans.) We are already nibbling at some of the fruits of ecumenism when we find a quasi-official document like this departing so far from the rigidities of eg. *Mysterium Fidei* which (it will probably not be remembered) insisted that in the definition of doctrine certain forms of words became sacred and must not be changed through the centuries. For this Statement, a conciliar definition need not be the only possible nor the most exact expression of a teaching, it may be improved upon or altogether restated. A platitude no doubt to many Christians, but a definite advance for our Church.

For Christians who are neither Anglicans nor Roman Catholics the point of debate will surely be the question of infallibility itself rather than where it resides. There will be doubts not so much about the special position accorded to the Pope as primate nor about the notion of *episcopus* as such (which is taken primarily in its general sense of pastoral care and oversight rather than in the concrete sense of 'the episcopate') but rather about the clear assertion that "When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous... Whatever clarification or interpretation may be propounded by the Church, the truth expressed will always be confessed". How will this be taken by, for instance, the Free Churches?

The Report of the Commission of Roman Catholics and Methodists² also came out in January but received far less publicity. A pity, it is in many ways a livelier and more interesting document. They are, for instance, quite clear that what matters is "agreement not for its own sake but looking towards joint action", and throughout there is a refreshing emphasis on praxis and

¹ *Authority in the Church*, CTS, 20p.

² *Growth in Understanding*, Catholic Information Service (74 Galloway Hill Lane, Abbots Langley, Herts.) np.

the Christian challenge to injustice and oppression, (eg. "When unjust power is overwhelming and deaf to persuasion, remains alien to the Christian's concern for the poor and oppressed.") They had before them the two earlier Anglican/Roman statements (on the eucharist and on ministry) and with some reservations they welcome them, but the important thing will be their verdict on the claim for ecclesial infallibility.

Here there seems to be a clear division between those for whom the gospel is primarily new every morning and those for whom the Church has a definitive and constitutive history. It is not that Catholics have to regard the history of the Church as one of unbroken progress, far from it, but they do naturally see it as a development, rather like the life of a human person. As you grow older you are not very likely to *improve* all the time but there is nonetheless a *growth* in the sense that there are certain events or decisions that have established your personality and which you cannot go back and re-argue. There were some mistakes which you recognise as such and which you have no serious temptation to repeat. For the Catholic it is like this with the past decisions of councils: they mark an option for some paths rather than others, the rejection of certain possibilities, definite stages of growth; and they remain even though the marks may no longer be particularly relevant. There can be no question of going back to fight those battles all over again and coming to some different conclusion. It is in this sense that for the Roman Catholic (and for the Anglican too) the past makes demands upon the present.

Both Churches, however, are constantly under the temptation to appeal to tradition in a quite different and much more mechanical way. By a happy chance January has also provided us with a classical example of this from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

We refer, of course, to the ludicrous Declaration on Women and the Priesthood³ which takes about 6000 words to say that nothing must ever happen for the first time. It is full of superb non-sequiturs of which my favourite is the argument that the equality of the sexes is irrelevant since the priesthood is not a human right. The argument, of course is not whether anybody has a 'right' to the priesthood but whether anybody has the right to refuse it to someone *simply* on the grounds of her sex. Connoisseurs of Curial folly will surely want to preserve this document alongside *Veterum Sapientiae* which (remember?) in equally solemn tones and for rather similar 'reasons' decreed that theology could only be conducted in the latin language. Others, again, will not bother.

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³*Women and the Priesthood*, CTS. 20p.