Comment:
Dialogue, Mitres and Pectoral Crosses

In a moving and surprising passage in the encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* (25 May 1995), Pope John Paul II declares that, as Bishop of Rome, he has a 'particular responsibility' in regard to 'the unity of all Christian communities'—'above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and *in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation*'. (My italics.)

The Pope recalls the first thousand years of Christian history during which disagreements in belief and discipline were referred by common consent to the Roman See as moderator. (A fact that some historians might query.) He cites the homily which he preached in Saint Peter's on 6 December 1987 in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I, when he acknowledged that 'what should have been a service sometimes manifested itself in a very different light'. (One recalls Pope Paul VI's unexpected gesture of kissing the feet of the Patriarch's emissary, twenty years earlier.) He prayed that the Holy Spirit might enlighten 'all the pastors and theologians of our Churches', so that 'we may seek—together, of course—the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned'. Now, as if impatient at the desire then voiced being taken as merely a pious velleity on a ceremonial occasion, the Pope insists that this reconsideration of his ministry is 'an immense task, which we cannot refuse and which I cannot carry out by myself'—'Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another'? (paragraphs 95 and 96).

True enough, the encyclical lays great emphasis on the restoration of unity with the ancient Churches of the East, but almost as much space is given to the importance of efforts to re-establish unity in the West. Indeed, the Pope notes that 'the ecumenical movement really began within the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the Reform' (paragraph 65)—a blindingly obvious truth, of course, yet an unprecedentedly candid admission by the successor of bishops of Rome who, for decades, did their best to ridicule and discredit ecumenism both within and beyond the Catholic Church. The Church leaders and theologians whom the Pope invites to join him in reconsidering the forms of his ministry, then, do not exclude representatives from the Reformed traditions.

Although the Pope recalls the 'profound emotion' with which he prayed with 'the Primate of the Anglican Communion' at Canterbury in 1982 (paragraph 24), the encyclical seems not to regard the Church of England as in any way different from the other Churches that emerged (as

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Catholics see it) in the sixteenth century. The Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II, it may be remembered, asserted that 'the Anglican communion occupies a special place' (paragraph 13). Pope Paul VI once spoke of the Church of England as a 'sister Church'. Interestingly, John Paul II picks out for special mention the eucharists at which he presided in Finland and Sweden in 1989 when the Lutheran bishops sought his blessing at communion time, as they did again in Rome at the Mass in 1991 on the sixth centenary of the canonization of Birgitta of Sweden (as the English text of the encyclical says: they mean Bridget).

Even so, however, the Archbishop of Canterbury was mitred at the principal liturgical ceremony at which he and the Pope presided during their meeting in Rome in November. Symbols are, of course, much more ambiguous than (even) the agreed statements that result from ecumenical dialogue. On the other hand, protocol at liturgical ceremonies reveals a good deal, however obliquely.

In the case of Dr Carey's visit to Rome the protocol seems eloquent enough. The word 'mitre' comes from the Greek word for a turban. It seems to have developed from the camelaucum, the white Phrygian-style cap that the popes started wearing on extra-liturgical occasions in the early eighth century. With its lappets hanging down at the back and one, two and then three coronets round its lower rim, it gradually turned by the fifteenth century into the beehive-shaped tiara of the modern papacy. Meanwhile, in a separate, much less spectacular development, something like the modern mitre—but not before the eleventh century—was adopted by bishops in the West as well as by abbots and certain other prelates. Mitres were seldom, if ever, worn by bishops in the Church of England from the Reformation to the nineteenth century, though they were regularly carried at their funerals.

More significant, perhaps, than the Archbishop's wearing a mitre in the Pope's presence, is the gift that John Paul II made to him, and to each of the bishops who accompanied him: *a pectoral cross*. Now, clearly, long-haired sandal-wearing old hippies from the 1960s often have a cross or some other sacred emblem suspended round their necks; for that matter, very likely, their cropped-headed successors in downtown Los Angeles occasionally sport tiaras. Clothing and accessories, as well as hair styles, mean a great deal—much more to men than to women, probably. In the hermeneutics of ecclesiastical hierarchy, at any rate, vestments are of great significance, and the gifts exchanged on ceremonial occasions are certainly not unconsidered trifles. Though abbots too wear them, the mitre and pectoral cross are as specific a sign of episcopal dignity as Roman Catholic etiquette confers. Coded as protocol always is, the Anglican Communion still seems to be honoured by the Roman See. Ceremonial speaks for itself; but many Catholics must be hoping that the Pope will not have to wait much longer for the fraternal dialogue to begin about his ministry.

F.K

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