

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Spring 1999 No. 72

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

A.R.C.I.C. III

David Phillips

What can we expect from ARCIC?

As we wait for ARCIC to release its report on authority it is perhaps unwise to engage in too much crystal ball gazing, but it is possible to make some educated guesses as to its content. Other recent reports from ARCIC, Rome and the Church of England House of Bishops hint at some of the directions likely to be followed.

‘Always the same’

Some of the enthusiastic ecumenists seem to have been exasperated by the way the Vatican has been handling the ecumenical issue of late. The Pope, in documents such as *Ut Unim Sint*, appears to be opening the way to dialogue and saying that he has a special ministry regarding unity. However, at the same time, and many Roman Catholics appear irritated by this, the Vatican is reiterating as if unmovable some of the causes of division from the past. The impression given is that unity is possible but on Rome’s terms. In the last edition of *Cross+Way* we reported how this happened in relation to the last ARCIC report on Eucharist and Ministry; eventually the Vatican issued *Clarifications* which put its ‘spin’ on how the ARCIC report should be properly understood.

It should be noted, however, that as the present Pope gets more frail there is some sort of power struggle going on in the Vatican. The mood of recent statements, one of which we examine below, reflects the power of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (historically this was the supreme court of the Inquisition) under Cardinal Ratzinger.

The Primacy of the Successor of Peter in the Mystery of the Church

In 1996 the CDF organized a symposium on The Primacy of the Successor of Peter. In November of last year the CDF chose to reissue part of the proceedings of the symposium under the title given. It is hard to believe that this is not related to the ARCIC discussion on Authority.

The report goes through the normal misreading of Scripture to justify the primacy of Peter whilst ignoring most of the biblical texts that would point to a contrary view. Nor does the report mention the view of some Roman Catholic writers that the emergence of a single Bishop in Rome was somewhat later than most other churches, and not clearly in evidence until mid second century.

What the report does do is to seek to establish grounds for the authority of the Pope and then define the nature of that authority. For example it says that, ‘Since the power of the primacy is supreme, there is no other authority to which the Roman Pontiff must juridically answer for his exercise of the gift he has received.’ (section 10). It sounds like absolute power, but this is denied on the grounds that the Pope listens to what the churches are saying! It should be remembered that the Popes’ claims to jurisdiction have been an issue in England since the days of William the Conqueror and historically in many other places too. Article 37 specifically refutes the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome in England. In addition to absolute power and jurisdiction the report also reasserts infallibility.

As part of ecumenical dialogue many are seeking to redefine the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. However, we are left in no doubt as to who is in the driving seat: 'it is clear that only the Pope (or the Pope with an Ecumenical Council) has, as the Successor of Peter, the authority and the competence to say the last word on the ways to exercise his pastoral ministry in the universal Church.' Still, it is good to know where you stand!

As has been remarked, this report should probably be seen as part of the power struggle in Catholicism between the 'magisterial papalism' of the CDF and the more collegial approach being pushed by others.

May They All Be One

In response to the Papal Encyclical *Ut Unim Sint* (which means the same in Latin), the House of Bishops issued a report in June 1997. What I found disturbing about this report was its complete lack of recognition that justification by faith alone is a continuing difference. In correspondence with the 'evangelical' Bishops my fears about the reasons for this omission were not allayed.

What is important for our consideration here is what is being said about authority. This is addressed in a section on the Magisterium where it is said that 'a living, teaching authority ... belongs to the body of the Church as a whole...'. They commend a more Anglican model of Church government (which hardly seems much to commend) and suggest that the primacy would have to be combined with 'conciliarity' (government by council) and involvement of the laity.

The report also considers the role of the Bishop of Rome and recognises the value of what it calls a 'personal ministry at the world-wide level'. This seems to be akin to the ministry of George Carey which was warmly commended by others at the Lambeth Conference. His international role, particularly in supporting those under persecution such as in Sudan has clearly been appreciated. However, calls by some that the Anglican Communion should adopt a more hierarchical trans-national structure which would have real power to determine doctrine and discipline other churches were not accepted. This would have established the Anglican Communion on the Roman model.

The report goes on to 'recognise the obstacle' that the claims to jurisdiction create, surely somewhat of an understatement. But, it then seems to assert that they are not arguing for primacy of honour only. Historically, I believe that primacy of honour is all that could be argued for from the Church in the first millennium. Primacy then meant respect, listening carefully and not taking a contrary view lightly. But just as Paul rebuked Peter for his error, so in the early Church if the Bishop of Rome fell into heresy or immorality then honour was very definitely withheld. What is not clearly explained is what form of primacy, other than honour, they might be prepared to accept. In the way that ARCIC and ecumenism have tended to work there are serious grounds for concern as to what sort of toe-hold is being given.

What can we expect?

It will be intriguing to see how ARCIC has picked its way through the minefield. It is difficult to imagine that the Vatican will have made any concessions. Past experience suggests that the report will use vague language which is open to more than one interpretation. The Vatican will then clarify the way in which the report should be read and we will be left looking on as Shishak carries off some more of the treasures of the once reformed Church of England.