

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

REFLECTIONS ON THE AGREED STATEMENT ON EUCHARISTIC DOCTRINE

I. THEOLOGY, FAITH AND UNITY

THIS ARTICLE is the first of two on the 'Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine', drawn up last September at the third (Windsor) meeting of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission. The first article comments on certain ecumenical questions underlying the Agreed Statement. The second will concern itself with the contents of the Statement.

An ecumenical document

What are the principles of criticism by which we may evaluate the Agreed Statement? It would be a mistake in procedure to treat it simply as a theological document. It is that, of course; but it is also much more. It is an ecumenical document as well as a statement of eucharistic belief.

If it were simply a theological document, we would judge it by the answers we give to questions such as these: Is it faithful to the statements of belief explicit or implicit in the life of the two communions? Is it a real, not merely a verbal, agreement between them? Does it faithfully reflect the living faith of the two communions? Does it fully represent each communion as a whole?

As an ecumenical document it must, of course, submit itself to the same kind of questioning. Theology is an important dimension of the ecumenical dialogue, just as the ecumenical dialogue is itself an important dimension of theology. An ecumenical document must meet the demands of precise theological statement. But it must go further, and meet demands that are perhaps even more rigorous, if less definable.

An ecumenical agreement should not be concerned exclusively with 'compatibility of doctrine', outlining what is or is not compatible with the doctrinal positions of each Church. Clearly, it should not be imprisoned in the past, resolving differences that are no longer relevant. But neither should it live only in the present, but look beyond it, bringing hope for the future. It should be a document of inspiration because it should be a document of renewal. If christian unity comes through christian renewal from within each separated tradition, then an agreed statement should be a privileged instrument of renewal.

Ecumenical agreement on a matter of faith should be at once the fruit of consensus, and the means of consensus. 'Consensus' seems the better word, rather than 'agreement'. 'Agreement' suggests something static. 'Consensus'

(even where it falls short of 'full agreement') conveys the idea of a growing together of minds and attitudes. Consensus begins within the group engaged in dialogue, but it can grow and grow until it becomes the consensus of the two communions sponsoring the dialogue. In this way, a limited agreement can move towards 'substantial agreement' and so to 'full agreement'. This reflects the pattern of a genuine ecumenical dialogue: it is a process, a movement, of spiritual renewal, leading by means of dialogue to the convergence of two communions.

This type of 'convergence by consensus' respects the living reality of theology within each communion. It seeks to detect its currents, channel its movement, and so increase the pace of doctrinal development and convergence.

From these considerations a second set of principles begins to emerge, by which to evaluate an ecumenical statement: its spirit, its insights and its horizons. Both sets of principles – ecumenical and theological – must be applied if we are to arrive at a just appreciation of the Agreed Statement.

Theology and faith

One of the most difficult tasks in the ecumenical dialogue is a theological one: how to discern precisely what is 'the faith' of each Church, and what belongs to its supporting structure of 'theology'. Yet it is one of the most crucial problems in the ecumenical dialogue. An ecumenical agreement should state the faith of the Church, not the theories or speculations of theologians. But are 'theology' and 'faith' really distinct? It is the purpose of this article to explore this problem.

The introduction to the Agreed Statement (signed by the two co-chairmen) makes an implicit distinction between faith and theology. There it is said that the members of the Commission represent 'a wide variety of theological background. Our intention was to reach a consensus at the level of faith, so that all of us might be able to say, within the limits of the statement: this is the christian faith of the Eucharist'.

The same kind of distinction is made in the statement itself: 'We acknowledge a variety of theological approaches within both our communions. But we have seen it as our task to find a way of advancing together beyond the doctrinal disagreements of the past. It is our hope that in view of the agreement which we have reached on eucharistic faith, this doctrine will no longer constitute an obstacle to the unity we seek' (n. 12).

Can we legitimately draw a distinction between 'faith' and 'theology'? And if so, in what sense? It is true that faith is the living faith of the Church, while theology is the special field of theologians. But in recognizing a distinction between them, we may be in danger of unduly restricting the meaning of theology, and even of detaching it from the Church's living faith. Perhaps that is why the statement avoids a crude antithesis between faith and theology, and speaks rather of 'theological background' and 'theological approaches' than of 'theology' as such.

Theology

What is theology? Etymologically, it is 'the science of God'. It was at one time, and still should be, 'the queen of the sciences'. Theology is first and foremost a work of the Church. It is the ever deeper penetration into the meaning of revelation as the Church reflects on the gospel of Christ. The Church is in fact the first and utterly indispensable theologian. She practises the art of theology as she listens to the holy Spirit in the midst of the changes of history, and providentially discerns the signs of the times.

It is the privilege, and the responsibility, of the teaching Church (that is, the pope and the bishops) to be the authentic judge of what is or is not divine revelation, and to proclaim and deepen the faith of the whole Church. Theology grows as the Church hears what the Spirit is speaking to the Church: the still, small voice becomes a clear and insistent summons as some facet of revelation is finally judged to be part of 'the faith'.

In this process of theological growth the theologians play an important part. They are the instruments of growth, serving the teaching Church. Revelation is not simply 'received': it has to be wrestled with, because it is handed on within the human situation. It comes from God, with the seal of God's infallibility, but it is given to men who are set in the midst of human frailty and tension. Theologians help to interpret the faith against the changing background of history, but only the teaching Church can finally authenticate their findings.

'Theology' has then another meaning: the work of theologians. This can have a widely differing value. It can be a living theology, on the way to acceptance by the final teaching authority in the Church. At a lower level, it can be the 'system' of a 'school' of theologians, or the 'approach' or 'emphasis' of a group or movement within the Church. Again, 'theology' can be a theory offered in explanation of a doctrine, without having doctrinal weight as a doctrine on its own.

Tension and harmony

Theology, especially in its primary sense, is a dynamic process, though it can be analyzed into a series of propositions or theories. It is dialectical: it has the task of establishing and promoting a harmony of tensions. The tensions with which it deals arise from the many paradoxes in the Church's life, and the nature of revelation itself.

Theology has to hold in equilibrium tensions such as these:

- (a) between the idea of the Church as 'event in the Spirit' and that of the Church as 'institution'; between the earthly phase of the Church and its consummation in heaven;
- (b) between the equality of its members and the differentiation of their functions; between the collegiality of the college of bishops and the primacy of the pope;
- (c) between the community faith of the Church and its free acceptance by

the individual; between the (objective) primacy of the Church's authority and the (subjective) primacy of the individual conscience;
 (d) between the faith of the apostolic Church and its continuous development towards the present and the future; between the 'one faith' and legitimate 'theological' pluralism.

Theology, even in its primary sense, is not something that can remain static. It is set within the dialectic between God and man, between man and man, between man and his own self-understanding. God does speak to man, but man receives God's word according to his capacity. His understanding of revelation is conditioned by history. There is a necessary tension between the truth as it exists in the mind of God, and the way in which man receives it.

But, though man receives revelation according to his capacity, by God's gift – through the guidance of the Church – he does not distort it. God has established a harmony between himself and man in giving with his revelation a chosen instrument for its true understanding, the *magisterium* or teaching authority of the Church. The *magisterium* resolves the tension between infinite truth and its communication to finite minds, or rather it maintains the tension in equilibrium. The Church mediates God's word in such a way that our faith can be true faith, built on the rock of God and of his Church.

Faith

The teaching authority of the Church is not only a service to faith; it is also a service to unity. Unity of faith is for the unity of the Church. It is not directly for certainty. It establishes a unity of mind between God and man, between christian and christian. An ecumenical document, as an instrument of unity in the Church, must be a document of faith, written in faith, appealing to faith and building up faith. But what is 'faith'?

There are two ways of defining faith, both with scriptural warrant. Faith can be defined in terms of our complete, supernatural response to God: as such, it includes hope and charity. Faith can also be defined in a more specialized way as our response to God's word through our acceptance of it in belief.

The two senses of faith intertwine. Faith as belief is the beginning of the process of salvation. But knowledge of God and our acceptance of his word, though responses of the mind, are at the same time responses of the whole person: it is not our mind that believes, it is ourselves. Knowledge of God leads to a communion of persons. 'This is eternal life': to know the Father and the Son in the power of the Spirit, but in the biblical sense of knowledge, which includes love as its consummation. God's self-disclosure to faith is also his self-communication through grace. God reveals himself to man as the God who saves, and in revealing himself he offers to man salvation, that is, the gift of himself. Even before we make our response of faith, God has already given us the gift of himself which enables us to make that response. By faith God enters into the life of man, so that man can enter into friendship

and communion with God. The response of faith is the homage of mind offered by one who seeks friendship and communion with God.

God reveals himself, and gives himself, through his eternal word. In Christ, God speaks to man, and in speaking offers to man the gift of salvation, the gift of the divine life itself. Christ, the incarnate word of God, is both prophet and priest: he proclaims God's gift, and in proclaiming it he mediates it.

The Church and faith

God's revelation comes from Christ through the Church. The Church is Christ's witness, his prophet and priest, as it proclaims and mediates God's revelation. The faith of the Church is a community faith, of which the Church is the guardian. The Church not only safeguards the faith once delivered to it: the Church must also promote its growth. The growth of the faith is more important than its defence, though both are the Church's responsibility. The faith grows, not in a vacuum but in the living community of the Church as it lives its life in the world: by its praying, by its pondering and by its service.

The Church preserves the content of the faith by the exercise of its teaching authority, its prophetic office. What is the relationship between the teaching office and the faith? The answer to this throws light on the relationship between theology, faith and unity.

The *magisterium* is not itself the faith. It is not a continuation of God's revelation in Christ. It is not itself the word of God. It is only a witness to God's word. It cannot therefore of itself directly communicate the saving knowledge of God. Even where it is infallible, the *magisterium* speaks the word of the Church, never (since the apostolic preaching) the word of God itself. The Church remains always a listener to the word, a reader of the word, a servant of the word; it is never its master.

But when the *magisterium* formulates the faith, it does so as the divinely commissioned witness to the faith. The teaching authority of the Church is a charisma given by Christ for the sake of the unity of his Church. It scrutinizes the faith of the whole Church, and has power to express it infallibly. The faith of the whole Church is infallible, but it can be recognized as infallible only through the *magisterium*.

The teaching office is a function, not of theologians (though they serve it, and in serving it they serve the Church), but of the apostolic office of the bishops and the petrine office of the pope. These two offices belong to one college, of which the pope is the visible centre of unity. The college of pope and bishops is the voice of the Church, and on occasion its infallible voice.

Infallibility

Infallibility is a quality that belongs to God, who is its source. It is also a special gift of God to his Church. It is a gift communicated under covenanted but restricted conditions. When it is exercised, the Church rests secure in

the knowledge of God's infallible word. Though the *magisterium* is not itself God's word, it mediates that word. When it exercises its God-given power of infallible teaching, it points infallibly to God's word, which we can then accept by divine faith. Our security of belief rests ultimately on God.

The infallible teaching of the Church is necessarily true: it is a true expression of the saving knowledge itself, only an infallible witness to its content. The formulations of the *magisterium* remain always inadequate: that is, they are only partial expressions of God's revelation. That revelation is inexhaustible, because it is God himself. Yet it is fully revealed in Christ. Our understanding of God's revelation in Christ can grow, but we can never fully grasp the totality of 'the mystery of Christ'.

The teaching of the Church is necessarily expressed in human language. Human language is a changing form of communication. We may have to disentangle the truth that is taught from the language and thought-forms in which it is formulated. But we have to remember that in her formulations the Church is seeking to assert a truth. The truth that is asserted is not tied to the changing patterns of language, thought and culture. The theologian, as the seeker after truth, must beware of thinking that truth changes with changing thought-forms. Truth necessarily remains truth, even where it is not the whole truth or is expressed in time-conditioned categories of thought.

The content of faith

In the response of faith to revelation, what is primary is our self-giving to God. The formulation of the content of faith is secondary. But it remains always important for the individual and for the whole community of the Church. The word of God must be formulated in the words of men. The exact formulation of the faith is one of the functions of theology, and of ecumenical theology in particular.

The content of the faith includes all that has been revealed in Christ, whether explicitly or implicitly. As it exists in the mind of God, it is one living reality, God himself. As it is understood by us, and made our own, it is a complex and growing thing.

It can be analysed at different levels:

- (a) the person and mission of Christ, that is, the 'mystery of Christ' in his relation to the Father and the holy Spirit, and in his incarnate life;
- (b) the activity of Christ and the holy Spirit in the Church;
- (c) man's relationship to God, that is, the whole economy of grace and salvation.

It may be noticed here, with reference to (b) that 'faith' is sometimes distinguished from 'order', that is, church organization, especially in regard to the ministry. In catholic theology 'Holy Order', as part of the 'ecclesial' and sacramental structure of the Church, belongs to the data of faith. The time-conditioned 'ecclesiastical' structure of the Church, as liable to change, is the creation of the Church, and does not belong to 'faith' in precisely the same way.

A hierarchy of truths

Within the content of faith there exists a 'hierarchy of truths'. Some truths, that of the blessed Trinity, for example, are more 'central' to the faith than others, for example, the assumption of our Lady. But truth remains truth, whether we see it as central or not. And all truths inter-penetrate each other, for they are all part of the unique mystery of God himself. This harmonious inter-relation of all truths is a justification of the strategy of the ecumenical dialogue, which begins with truths that are held in common. But, even if truths can be isolated from each other for the purposes of dialogue, the totality of truth must be respected: one cannot sacrifice one truth for the sake of others.

The concept of a hierarchy of truths arises from the fact that the human mind is finite, limited in its power of concentration. It cannot grasp the totality of truth by intuition. So in history heresies have been born from an over-concentration on one aspect of truth. Today, with the fragmentation of thought, the greatest service to theology may well be the effort to hold all truths in their proper balance and relationship.

In its history, the Church has found it necessary at different times to emphasize certain truths, defending them and proclaiming them in times of crisis. Yet all are facets of the one truth, seen by us with greater clarity through the changes of history. The 'hierarchy of truths' does not mean a scale of truths ranging from the essential to the non-essential. It is a scale of truths related (from our finite stand-point) more or less closely to 'the centre'. It invites an examination of those truths which Christians agree are at the very heart of the gospel, so that separated Christians may grow together into the totality of truth.

Some truths have been solemnly defined. Some have been accepted by the Church without question. Others are in process of maturation towards universal acceptance or infallible definition. Others again remain as the theories of theologians.

We are faced again with the question of 'theology'. Can the 'one faith' (with its 'hierarchy of truths') admit different 'theologies'? Is pluriformity of theology compatible with the unity of the faith? If it is, it is important for the ecumenical dialogue to know in what sense this may be true.

The meaning of theology

If 'theology' is a synonym for 'faith', then there cannot be a pluriformity of theology. In this sense, if there is one faith, there is only one theology. (And it is important to maintain this understanding of 'theology', and not allow it to be driven out by other meanings it can legitimately possess). A variety of 'theologies' (understanding 'theology' in its primary sense) would be simply a series of conflicting versions of the one faith. 'Comprehensiveness' of faith is not catholicity.

But 'theology' is also used to describe the theories offered by theologians

to explain a truth of revelation, without being rivals to that truth. In this sense, there is room for legitimate variety, until the *magisterium* has spoken. The one faith can be interpreted and explained by a variety of 'theologies'. To deny pluriformity of 'theology' in this sense would be theological sectarianism.

But there is a special problem lying between these two areas of theology. 'Theology' is also applied to a developing understanding of revelation: truths hardening into dogma but not as yet formally defined or universally accepted. One cannot restrict the scope of theology (or of the ecumenical dialogue) to scriptural truths, conciliar statements or doctrine universally admitted in the Church. To do so would be to take a static view of theology. The Church's thinking is a living and growing reality as it matures towards certainty.

It is in this area of theology that there is perhaps the greatest problem for the ecumenical dialogue: here there is need for ecumenical consensus rather than for clearly defined agreement. At the same time, it is at this point that there is hope for the future, as christians learn to share the movement of theology. Through theology-in-movement we may begin to share a great and inspiring vision.

Principles for the dialogue

We may summarize the discussion by outlining some general principles governing theological dialogue.

(a) the language and thought-forms of theology must be carefully distinguished from theology itself. The new language in which consensus is most fruitfully expressed is a biblical, patristic and contemporary language rather than a technically 'theological' one. The further it is from the language of historical controversy the better.

The ecumenical dialogue is in part a process of detaching theological statements from the conceptual, imaginative or cultural framework in which they are usually expressed, and so of making them more meaningful to contemporary man without emptying them of their true content. But this does not mean that language must necessarily fail in the effort to express divine mysteries, only that it may be an imperfect vehicle of revelation.

(b) Agreement on the more 'central' truths of revelation is the growth-point of understanding among separated christians. It is here that the dialogue should begin. Yet we must not interpret the 'hierarchy of truths' as if the less central truths were of no importance, and so could be conveniently ignored.

(c) The agenda for the dialogue must include, as well as discussion on scripture and established teaching, the living theology of each Church as it is here and now developing. Ultimately, union between churches depends on an agreed faith and an agreed centre of authority. This agreed faith, though in catholic theology it is witnessed to by the college of bishops and the pope, is in fact the faith of the whole Church. It is important therefore to encourage a consensus, especially in regard to a developing theology.

It is important also to promote a consensus, and a wider ecumenical consensus beyond the actual partners of a dialogue, even before there is authoritative agreement. Unity is not a simple return to old positions on one side or the other; it should mean a growth towards something greater. The ecumenical dialogue can be the providential means of securing this.

Within this consensus there should be noted the possible 'theologies' which are compatible with true unity of faith. Where necessary, care should be taken to expose incompatible versions of the one faith. But where there is room for legitimate pluriformity, this also should be noted, though it should be studied in the light of the way in which theology is really moving within each Church.

These principles are listed, not as adverse judgments on the Agreed Statement on the Eucharist, but to establish the right context in which to make a constructive evaluation of the Statement, not only as a theological document but as an ecumenical exercise as well.

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