

Society for Ecumenical Studies

Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church – Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority

The Ravenna Document: Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, November 2007

Report from David Carter

January 2008

The publication of the Ravenna document of the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue seems to offer clear hope of a closer relationship between the two churches, a fact underlined by a consultation that Pope Benedict XVI held, just after the publication, with the cardinals on the subject.

The report majors on the theme that there is a balance between conciliarity and primacy at every level of the Church's life, local, regional and universal. One feels that this might be spelt out a bit more clearly at the very local level of the diocese, though there is an emphasis upon the responsibility of all the faithful for the faith professed at their baptism (paragraph 7) and an emphasis upon the way in which the bishop is in the (local) church and the church in the bishop. As with all good dialogue reports, there are points that will have wider relevance and appeal; and the Anglican and Protestant churches will welcome the emphasis upon the responsibility of all the faithful, even though it falls well short of emphasising the need (in their eyes) to give them a role in the governance of the churches.

It is clearly acknowledged that authority in the Church is different from that exercised in the secular affairs of men and that it is the authority of love and service. It is authority without domination (paragraph 14): 'For Christians to rule is to serve'. One is reminded of the teaching of the Wesleyan, Benjamin

Gregory, that presbyters are 'ruling servants and serving rulers'. The Commission would no doubt also echo the teaching of William Shrewsbury that the greatest evil that can befall a church is a 'want of confidence between the ministers and the people'. It might have quoted Johann Adam Möhler on the bishop as the 'incarnation of love' in the local church, reminding readers of his 'almost invisibility' amongst his people in the primitive Church.

The report emphasises that there is a universal primacy and that it belongs to the Bishop of Rome as the first among equals. It is, however, necessarily cautious in stressing that, though such a primacy was acknowledged in the first millennium, there were, even then, different interpretations of its implications as between east and west. In this, the report shows the same combination of realism and forward looking that have been shown in the recent reports of the international Catholic-Methodist Commission. There is no attempt to disguise continuing disagreements and, thus, the amount of work yet to be done. At the same time, there is a clear challenge to move on by continuing to explore the nature of the Petrine ministry and its role within the Universal Church. No one wants undue haste and the danger of another Council of Florence. At the same time, no one wants to delay, faced as we are with the grave contemporary missionary situation (paragraph 1).

Members of the Society will be interested to know that Fr Paul McPartlan, our former President, has been made co-chair of a sub-group in the Commission which is to look at the way in which the primacy was understood, both in the West and in the East, in the first millennium. The other co-chair is Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, also very well known to us as a strong supporter and frequent speaker at ecumenical events for dialogue and encounter. Paul expressed a hope that I would pray for the progress of this work and I am sure that many others in the Society would also wish to do so.