23A.

AUTHORITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Draft of Paper for National Faith and Order Colloquium, June 7-11, 1970

by Avery Dulles, S.J. (later, Cardinal) response to Elliott

The two papers to be prepared for this meeting both contain in their titles the term "community." The focus of the present colloquium on community, if I am not mistaken, is a direct outgrowth of the discussions of the past two years on salvation. In these discussions it became clear to the participants that salvation is never a purely individual matter. The divine blessings are conferred upon individuals in and through their association with others. The community leads men to salvation, and salvation - the effectual presence of the saving God - reinforces and extends community.

"The Church," according to last years Findings, "is the new community in Christ."[1] "It was to a real community of believers that Christ entrusted His mission to the world and gave His promise to be with the faithful community." To be a faithful community, of course, the Church must be outwardly directed to the larger community of all mankind. Therefore, as the Findings went on to say, "the Church should seek urgently to understand her mission under the Cross as that of a saving and healing community."[2]

At last year's Colloquium, special attention was called to the task of Faith and Order to address itself to the problem of the inner coherence of the Church as a society of witness and of

worship. "In our discussion of Salvation and Life," said the Findings, "we support the search for formulations sufficiently multi-faceted to reflect legitimate diversity of conviction and emphasis. In seeking such formulations we become aware that there are limits to diversity of conviction and emphasis beyond which legitimacy can no longer be established; that is to say, there is a point at which diversity can become disruptive discontinuity."[3]

The task of this Colloquium, as I understand it, is to explore more deeply the nature of community, and especially of that community which the Church is called to be. On the one hand there are the claims of stability and authority, the safeguards of unity; on the other hand, there are the claims of change and diversity, which may lead to conflicts within the community itself. At what point does conflict and diversity become destructive and unacceptable? Up to what point is it healthy and desirable?

The four terms which appear in the titles of this year's talks - stability, conflict, authority, and diversity - could be paired in various ways. Dr. Elliott has been asked to discuss stability and conflict; I have been asked to treat authority and diversity. To some extent, I suspect, we shall be touching on the same problems. It is scarcely possible to speak of stability without discussing authority, or of diversity without reference to conflict. There is nothing in the nature of the case which requires that stability and conflict should be treated in one

paper, authority and diversity in another. With equal logic, authority might have been paired with conflict; for conflict generally involves a difference of view regarding the authority to be accepted. Stability, on the other hand, could have been paired with diversity, for the diversity between successive periods of time is the definition of change, and is the opposite of stability. Granting the mutual relationships between the terms, then, it seems inevitable that there should be some overlap between the two papers. If this should be the case, nothing will be lost. The agreements and disagreements between the points of view of the authors will hopefully provide material for reflection on the part of the study groups which will address themselves to the problems of the Colloquium, and for discussion at the Colloquium itself.

To discuss in its full range the role of authority and the limits of diversity in every kind of community would far exceed the possibilities of a single paper. I believe it will be appropriate, therefore, to confine my attention to authority and diversity in that specific community which is ordinarily called the Church.

I. Authority in the Church

When we hear the word "authority" most of us spontaneously think of something negative. We think of persons whose role is to impose unwelcome obligations, to restrict free development and

inquiry, to pass sentence, to inflict penalties. Our primary image of authority is that of the lawmaker, the judge, the policeman. This notion of authority, I submit, is entirely too narrow and juridical.

If we go back to the root meaning of the term, it seems ironic that a term etymologically connected with creativity (Latin auctor, meaning "creator" or "author") and growth (Latin auctio, meaning "growth") should have come to suggest inhibition and diminishment. Even today, however, these negative elements do not always predominate. When I say, for instance, that Kittredge was an authority on Shakespeare, or that Gandhi enjoyed great authority among his people, the implication is that these gentlemen had certain admirable qualities and that people freely accepted their influence. An authority, therefore, is one entitled to respect, whose views may be presumed to be well founded, and who for that reason may be cited to good effect. The term applies most aptly to a leader of vision and conviction - to one who "speaks with authority."

At this point it becomes helpful, I believe, to distinguish between power, as implying physical might, and authority, which connotes moral influence. Unlike authority, power does not presuppose intelligence or freedom in either the being which exercises it or in the being which submits to it. Power can be exerted by dead matter and can affect lifeless things, animals, and insane or unwilling persons. Authority, however, is the moral influence

of one free, intelligent being upon another. The notion of authority is connected with right. When a ruler exceeds his mandate, or when he becomes a tyrant, he may retain his power, but he loses his authority. Power may be sheerly destructive - though it is not always such. Authority, on the other hand, connotes both competence and beneficence, although it sometimes inflicts harm for the sake of a greater good.

As is implied in what has just been said, authority is an interpersonal relationship. No individual is an authority for himself, but he may be an authority for others, as others may be for him. Authority, primarily, attaches to persons. Things, such as laws or books, can become authorities insofar as they are objectifications of the personal spirit. The interpersonal relationship in question involves trust. Where there is no trust there may be power but there cannot be authority.

Every social organization includes persons placed in authority. A civil society (such as the State) is built upon certain commonly accepted goals and procedures, set forth in constitutional declarations and legal documents which then become "authorities." Those who have the office or competence to interpret and apply these principles and laws to particular situations are also, in their way, authorities. In so doing they direct the actions of individuals with a view to the common good.

Any religious group presupposes a whole system of authorities. Where conflicts become severe this is generally a sign of disagreement within the community as to the relative priorities

to be assigned to various authorities. Hence for the preservation and vitality of any religious community it is of the greatest importance to confront in all seriousness the question of authority.

The religious authorities are, in the first instance, the God or gods recognized by the community. Secondarily, they are the created agencies through which the divine is thought to manifest itself. Some such manifestations are transient and unrepeatable; others are stable and habitual. Thus in any religion one finds a certain tension between the charismatic and the sacerdotal, between event and institution.

In the biblical religions the authority par excellence is Yahweh, the God of Israel. A central theme of the Old Testament is that Israel should put its trust in him alone. He is the creator and savior of Israel and, indeed, creator and rightful Lord of the whole universe. "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other" - runs the refrain of Second Isaiah (45:22, etc.). Israel's faith and action as a religious people are totally determined by the word of God.

Even within Israel, however, there were conflicts regarding the locus of authority. How was the word of the Lord to be identified? To the extent that God was felt to be present addressing his people through the Mosaic Law, the Law became authoritative. But in addition to the Law, and in partial tension with it, were other authorities such as the priestly interpreters,

who expounded and defended the tradition, and the prophets, who uttered the "word of God" in new and timely revelations. The people were sometimes divided according to which prophets they regarded as authentic and how far they were committed to the Law and the priestly traditions.

What is characteristic of the New Testament is of course that God was thought to have expressed himself fully, definitively, and for all mankind in the life, teaching, death, and ressurrection of Jesus of Nazareth - or, more briefly, in the "Christ event." For Christians Jesus Christ is the living word of God; and in his case it may be said unequivocally that the word is God. Whatever disagreement there may be among Christians regarding the secondary loci of authority, they are at one in looking upon the Incarnate Logos as the authority par excellence.

On the basis of the New Testament, it is undeniable that Christianity is fundamentally a "religion of authority." It comes into the world as a definite message to be believed and proclaimed. Jesus selects disciples, trains them, tells them what to say, sends them forth as messengers. Where not accepted, they are to "shake the dust from their feet" (Mt 10:14). For the early community, the gospel unquestionably demands the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5, 16:26). It is not something that can be freely tampered with by men. "Even if we or an angel of heaven should preach a gospel to you other than that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema!" (Gal 1:9).

While Christians of all ages agree in taking Christ and his gospel as the supreme authority, this agreement does not prevent the occurrence of serious disputes concerning the secondary loci of authority. Where is the gospel to be authentically found? Different views on this matter have been a perpetual source of conflict and division within the Christian tradition. In broad strokes one may distinguish between more "catholic" positions, which tend to identify Christ's saving message rather closely with a given ecclesiastical tradition, and "protestant" positions which tend to criticize all created authorities in the name of the Word of God. In a characteristically "protestant" response to the efforts of the Nazis to organize the "German Christian" movement, the Barmen Declaration of 1934 asserted the sole lordship of Jesus Christ. "We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize yet other happenings and powers, images and truths as divine revelation alongside of this one Word of God, as a source of her preaching."[4]

But even the Barmen Declaration, while rejecting the idea of revelation through secular history, had to refer to some particular places in which the genuine Christ was found. "Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death."[5] But the reference to Scripture immediately raises other questions: where is Scripture rightly heard and interpreted? According to Barmen, "The Christian church is the community of brethren in which Jesus Christ presently works in

the word and sacraments through the Holy Spirit."[6] Thus the lordship of Jesus Christ, even in this strongly "protestant" interpretation, includes the authority of the Holy Spirit, that of the Bible, Christian preaching, sacramental worship, and finally that of the gathered community. These are "authoritative" insofar as they enable man to find the word of God in its fullness and purity.

In speaking of the secondary authorities we have inevitably raised the long and bitterly debated question of Scripture vs. Tradition - a question far too subtle and complicated to be dealt with in a satisfactory way in a summary paper such as this. It may suffice to say here that the present author sees no advantage in setting these two types of authority off against each other, as though what were given to the one were taken away from the other. Tradition is, most fundamentally, the way in which the authority of Scripture becomes manifest and effective for generations who live in post-apostolic times. Tradition lives off Scripture and, at the same time, makes Scripture live.

By Scripture we mean the authentic literary objectification of the faith of the people of God during its formative period - from the earliest times until the end of the apostolic age. This period is "canonical" or normative for the subsequent life of the Church, and hence its authentic expressions have undying importance. By tradition we normally mean the authentic expressions of the life of the people of God in later generations. To ask what expressions

are authentic is to raise the question where tradition is to be found; and this is where the Christian churches seem to disagree. Expressions of the ongoing life of the Church are authoritative only because and insofar as the Holy Spirit is deemed to be active in the community, assisting it to interpret the gospel rightly. Thus the authority of the community can in no way be set up in opposition to God.

In most Christian bodies, several types of authority exist concurrently. On the one hand there is the juridical and public authority of the highest officers - whether pope, bishops, or ruling bodies, such as assemblies, synods, and councils. These officials make their authority felt, normally, by issuing documents, which are regarded as normative for the group. On the other hand, there are private authorities, which in their own way are no less important than the officials. Under this heading one would have to include, first, scholars, who speak on the basis of their research and professional competence. Secondly, there are "charismatic persons" who seem to be endowed with a more than common measure of the true Christian spirit. Like the prophets of old, these charismatics often feel impelled to criticize the officials and scholars, to rebuke them for their infidelity and insensitivity. Finally, there is the authority of consensus. In the Church, public opinion is definitely a force to be reckoned with, especially in this democratic age.

As has been said above, Christianity recognizes only one

absolute authority - that of God himself. This means that all the secondary authorities are subject to criticism and correction. Every created channel which manifests God, and brings men to him, is capable also of misleading men, and turning them away from God. If the secondary authorities were absolutized Christianity would fall into idolatry, and thus defect from the "radical monotheism" on which it is based.

Christianity owes its peculiar genius in great part to its delicately balanced system of authorities. If all the authorities are permitted to function within their respective spheres, and are prevented from exceeding their proper limits, the Christian faith retains both its continuity with its own past and its ability to adapt itself to new situations. No one of the secondary religious authorities is absolute. As Tillich has shown, not even the most rigid biblicist ever succeeds in making an absolute out of the Bible; the Bible is always read in the light of tradition, even when the tradition adopts the slogan, "Scripture alone." As Rahner, Küng, and others, have shown, Roman Catholicism could not make the pope an absolute authority without violence to its own fundamental principles. The authority of the pope is intrinsically connected with other authorities: Scripture, the monuments of tradition, the universal episcopate, and the living faith of the Church as a whole.

In practice, therefore, Christianity lives off a combination of irreducibly distinct but inseparably connected authorities.

When the authorities mutually confirm each other, their weight is greater. When any one authority is absolutized at the expense of the others, it weakens itself and loses credibility.

Periodically, in the history of the Church, shifts occur in the emphasis given to one or another of the secondary authorities. In some periods, Scripture itself seems to give direct answers to the urgent questions; in others, Scripture does not seem to offer more than a remote foundation for answers that have to be worked out afresh. In some eras, implicit confidence is placed in the hierarchy of office; in others, greater importance is attached to expertise of the scholar, the insight of the prophet, or the consensus of the faithful. In periods of transition, when people are critical of the particular forms authority has assumed in the recent past, it may seem that authority itself is being contested and undermined; but on reflection, and in a wider perspective, it becomes apparent that authority is merely changing its forms. Authority seems to be a permanent feature, which will endure as long as Christianity itself.

At the present moment, the problem of authority confronts different churches in different ways. In some churches, such as Roman Catholicism, the vertical authority of office seems to be yielding to the horizontal authority of consensus.[7] In nearly all churches, the continuing authority of longstanding tradition is being challenged by the contemporary authority of public opinion. While some are afraid that all authority is being undermined, the

greater danger is pehaps that the new forms of authority are being too uncritically accepted. For the good of the community it is necessary to make room for loyal dissent, even from the most recent forms of popular enthusiasm. Church structures are needed to safeguard the independence of the scholar, the prophet, the man out of phase with his times. At this point, therefore, we must turn to some consideration of how authority is related both to unity and to diversity in the Church.

II. Unity and Diversity

Authority, of which we have spoken thus far, is generally, and rightly, regarded as a unitive force. Since every society is a unity of order, a primary function of authority in any society is to coordinate the activities of the members for the sake of the common good. In the Christian community authority is not simply a means of achieving arbitrarily chosen goals, but is constitutive of the Church itself. Because God has spoken authoritatively in Jesus Christ, the Church can and must exist. Since there is only one Lord and one Spirit, and one gospel expressive of both, the Church must necessarily be one. The Church, as a single community, is the one body of Christ and the one temple of the Holy Spirit. The various secondary authorities in the Church solidify and perfect the unity of the Church itself.

Notwithstanding all disagreements about the form that the unity of the Church must take, no Christian can seriously deny that the Church must be one. It stands in the world as a sign

that Christ has torn down all barriers, and that there is no longer any wall of division between Jew and Gentile, between Greek and barbarian, between bondsman and freeman. The Church must be internally one because otherwise it could not perform its function of gathering together in the name of Christ the scattered children of God. According to Vatican Council II the Church is a "sign and instrument", that is to say, a "sacrament", of the unity willed by God for all mankind[8]

Granted the necessary unity of the Church, it must still be asked what form this unity must take. In any society the unity must be a variegated and dynamic one; for a society is by nature a communion of many individuals whose individuality is not lost, but hopefully enhanced, by their mutual association. Each individual in the Church is called to union with God in a fashion proper to himself, and has a properly personal contribution to make to the total life of the Church. The Holy Spirit, says Paul, looking toward the common good, "apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Cor 12: 7, 11).

According to what we may call the "principle of incarnation," the gospel demands to be realized in distinctive ways in different social contexts. It is therefore proper that local churches should differ from one another: Athens is not Corinth, Rome is not Jerusalem, Bombay is not New York. It is proper, also, that Christianity should adapt itself to temporal changes.

Christian history can be divided into a number of major eras - such as the apostolic, the patristic, the medieval, the early modern, and the contemporary. Each major cultural shift has brought about innovations in doctrine, in ecclesiastical structures, in modes of worship, and in ethical patterns.

Without imagining that there is any such thing as a timeless and universal essence of Christianity, which could be predicated universally of each realization, we must consciously distinguish between Christianity itself and any one of its historical incarnations. Such a distinction is necessary not only for sociological, but for properly theological, reasons.

This is true, in the first place, because Christian faith bears primarily on the ineffable mystery of God himself in his free and loving self-donation to man. The revelation can be thematized in terms of the expressive materials offered by any given culture (its secular experience, its historical memories, its characteristic modes of thought and its literary usages) but this thematization cannot be communicative to persons who do not - at least by an effort of imagination - identify themselves with the culture in question. Christianity therefore has to be constantly re-thematized; its message has to be translated into the patterns called for by new socio-cultural contexts.

Secondly, pluriformity is permitted and demanded by the pilgrim status of the Church, as underscored by the ecclesiology which prevailed both at the Faith and Order Conference at Lund (1952) and at Vatican Council II. Theology, both Protestant and

Catholic, today clearly recognizes that the Church has not arrived at its final destination, but is still groping its way through the vicissitudes of history. It must therefore adapt its forms of thought and expression to the successive situations in which faith finds itself.

Thirdly, pluriformity is encouraged by the diversity and mutual tension among the authoritative organs of revelation, as enumerated in Part I above. God's self-revelation in Christ comes to man as refracted through different agencies, all of them humanly conditioned.

The Old Testament contains a multitude of contrasting ideas, sometimes registering doctrinal developments achieved over the course of time, sometimes reflecting tensions between different schools, such as the priestly, the royal, the prophetic, the apocalyptic, and the sapiential.

Similar tensions may be found within the New Testament itself. Käsemann correctly maintains that "the variability of the kerygma in the New Testament is an expression of the fact that in primitive Christianity a wealth of different confessions were already in existence, constantly replacing each other, combining with each other, and undergoing mutual delimitation."[9] The apocalyptic thinking of Revelation and the Markan apocalypse (ch. 13) contrasts sharply with the "realized eschatology" of the Fourth Gospel; the "sola fide" of Romans is most difficult to reconcile, on the conceptual plane, with the "works-righteousness" of James; nor can the "adoptionist" Christology of the

early chapters of Acts be easily harmonized, theologically, with the high Christology of the Captivity Epistles.

The problem of conceptual pluralism is augmented when attention is given to the non-biblical authorities. Tradition in its various forms produces formulations of the Christian faith which have to be combined dialectically with the affirmations of Scripture - in such a way that neither suppresses the critical voice of the other. The contemporary Christian, seeking authentic union with God, must open himself to many influences, past and present - the reflections of scholars, the admonitions of spiritual leaders, the affirmations of official Church bodies, and the spontaneous instinct of the faithful.

This plurality of authentic Christian sources protects the believer from being crushed by the weight of any single authority; it restrains any one organ from so imposing itself as to eliminate what the others have to say. It provides a margin of liberty within which each individual can feel encouraged to make his own distinctive contribution; to understand the faith in a way proper to himself. And at the same time it provides the Church as a whole with the suppleness it needs to operate in different parts of the globe and in a rapidly changing world.

Some, discontent with the intellectual untidiness generated by the recognition of such diverse authorities, seek to reduce everything to unity by arbitrarily exalting one authority above all the others. For Käsemann, the decisive element would seem to be the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith as set forth

in Romans and Galatians. For certain Catholics, the contemporary teaching of the papacy would seem to be the sole reliable guide. As against all such simplistic solutions, we should prefer to say that the "word of God" is best heard when one maintains a certain critical distance from any given expression of the word of God. By holding a multitude of irreducibly distinct articulations in balance one can best position himself to hear what God may be saying here and now. To recognize the historically conditioned character of every expression of faith is not to succumb to historical relativism, but rather to escape imprisonment within the relativities of any particular time and place.

In this age of planetary unification, one might think that the distinctness and autonomy of the churches would be on the wane. In fact, however, it would seem that within most denominations, pluralism is on the increase. Each culture is more conscious than heretofore of its special insights and needs. The growing historical consciousness of Western man, to which reference has already been made, sharply increases our awareness of the rather limited perspectives in which Christianity has been understood and proclaimed in the Western European tradition.

Vatican Council II took giant strides in reactivating the principle of pluralism in Roman Catholicism. Significant in this regard is the omission of the word "Roman" in the designation of the Catholic Church. Where Vatican Council I had spoken of the "Roman Catholic Church,"[10] Vatican II substituted the

expression, "the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor."[11] The Constitution on the Church, moreover, makes much of the autonomy of the particular churches within the Catholic family. "These Churches retain their own traditions without in any way lessening the primacy of the Chair of Peter," part of whose task is precisely to "protect legitimate differences."[12] The Decree on Ecumenism approves the distinctive heritage of the Eastern Churches as regards customs, modes of worship, and ways of understanding and proclaiming divine things.[13] The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World declares that the Church "in virtue of her mission and nature... is bound to no particular form of human culture."[14] It teaches that "the accommodated preaching of the revealed word ought to remain the law of all evangelization" so that "each nation develops the ability to express Christ's message in its own way."[15] The Decree on Missionary Activity, evoking the memory of Pentecost, holds forth the ideal of a Church which "speaks all tongues."[16] The Constitution on the Liturgy, finally, warns repeatedly against the dangers of imposing rigid uniformity and of failing to respect and foster the various gifts of different races and peoples.[17]

In this fostering of greater internal pluralism within the Catholic communion one may see a positive step promoting the restoration of Christian unity. Similar developments have already

taken place within many other Christian denominations. When it becomes apparent that the modes of thinking and worship tolerated within a given community differ as widely from one another as from those of other communions, the time has come to ask in all seriousness whether the existing denominational divisions have not outlived their usefulness. Without any suppression of the distinctive heritage of each family, a restoration of communion may become possible, so that Christians of different traditions will recognize each other as members of the same body of Christ.

Conversely it may be observed that a failure to allow for pluralism in the realizations of Christianity has been a major cause of dissidence. Victimized by "non-theological factors" - to use the expression which C. H. Dodd has rendered famous - whole groups of Christians have needlessly anathematized each other. Believers conscious of the inevitable historical and cultural conditioning in man's understanding and practice of the gospel will have reason to be more tolerant of one another's idiosyncracies. They should be more capable of the empathy required to find Christ in the preaching and worship of cultures alien to their own. Where they do detect real shortcomings, they will be less inclined to judge these harshly, more ready to acknowledge the beam in their own eye.

Notwithstanding all the merits of pluralism, we must, I think, acknowledge that it has its limits and dangers. If the word of God cannot be identified with any particular expression,

it by no means follows that every human attitude and expression is consonant with the gospel of Christ. The people of God in every age and locality must constantly labor to find, through an arduous process of "discerning the spirits," what is an apt manner of incarnating the gospel in their own socio-cultural situation. And if the people of God is to be a sign of Christ raised aloft among all the nations, there must be some recognizable continuity between the present proclamation of the gospel and the original heralding of the faith in New Testament times. The particular expressions of the faith in different lands, moreover, must not be so diverse that the Church ceases to be a sign of unity. Some manifest unity in faith, in structure, in worship, and in moral teaching is necessary in order that the Church may effectively serve as a sign and instrument of the union and reconciliation of all mankind. Thus it remains an important task of ecclesiastical authority to see to it that the differences between particular churches, and the transformations of Christian life, do not undermine the apostolicity and catholic unity essential to the Church.

III. Problem Areas

This paper has dealt with the problem of diversity vs. unity, and with the functions of authority, only in the most general terms, and has consequently remained on a high level of abstraction. In order to put any of the principles here set forth to practical use, it would be necessary to speak much more

concretely of particular problems - and each one of these problems would have to be discussed within the perspectives and possibilities of the various Christian traditions. For the sake of brevity, it may suffice to call attention to some major areas which call for intense investigation and discussion. These may be classified under the rubrics of credal statement, church structures, forms of worship, and ethical teaching.

1. Credal statement. Do the biblical confessions (e.g. Yahweh is God; Jesus is Lord) and the early creeds (Apostolic, Nicene...) give us terms and propositions which can and must be accepted by the Church throughout all ages and in all parts of the world? Or could the Church cease to use the name of Yahweh, desist from calling Jesus the Son of God, or authorize creeds which do not stand in continuity with those handed down from antiquity? The same problem arises with regard to the dogmatic pronouncements of the early Councils and the confessional statements of the major denominations. Could the Church cease to affirm that God is tripersonal or that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures? Could it question or deny the truth of these affirmations in the sense intended by the original authors? Are there any specifiable limits to the doctrinal mobility and variety in the Church?

Some hold that, while the teaching of Scripture and the creeds is irreversible, the terminology and even the conceptual schemes are subject to change in accordance with the thought

patterns, customary modes of speech, and vital concerns of various cultures. Is this distinction between affirmation, conceptualization, and language sound and viable? Some distinguish between reformable and irreformable statements, between content and formulation, between what was said and what is meant, etc. Are distinctions of this type dangerous to the continuity of the faith? Do they introduce too much relativity or do they, on the contrary, tie the Church too much to its own past, preventing creative restatements of the faith? Are such distinctions oversubtle efforts to hang on to both sides of a contradiction rather than frankly admitting that the faith changes or firmly insisting that it remains constant?

2. Church structures. Are there any structures of "divine institution" which belong inalienably to the essential nature of the Church? Some believe that Christ himself instituted the pastoral office and conferred upon it the task of preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, and governing the corporate life of the people of God. Some go yet further and hold that the New Testament authorizes and imposes certain specific forms of ministry - e.g. the papal, the episcopal, the presbyteral, the congregational. Some hold that a ministry transmitted by apostolic succession through the imposition of hands is essential to the esse of the Church. Roman Catholicism commonly holds that the Petrine office, with its primacy, is a permanent and immutable feature of the Church.

On the other hand, there are some who argue that the New Testament sanctions diversity in the forms of ministry. The fact that different ecclesiastical structures seem to have existed in different local Churches is taken as a charter of liberty. Does this mean that the Church is free at any time to institute any form of ecclesiastical government that seems adapted to the times? Or can the Church be bound by the major historical decisions taken in the past, and thus irreversibly committed to develop in a certain direction?

3. Forms of Worship. Did Christ institute any definite sacraments, and, if so, can this be proved from New Testament exegesis? The majority of Christians would seem to hold that, in faithfulness to the precept of Christ, the Church must perpetually administer baptism and celebrate the Lord's Supper. Some would insist that the seven sacraments recognized in the later middle ages were established by Christ, or are a legitimate and necessary development of what Christ instituted, and must always continue to be administered.

Once it is admitted that certain sacraments are divinely instituted and perpetual, questions arise regarding the words and ceremonies attaching to these sacraments. Must the Church in baptizing adhere to the trinitarian formula as given in the finale of Matthew's Gospel? In the Lord's Supper, must the "words of institution" (as given in the Synoptics ~~of~~ in 1 Corinthians) be more or less closely followed? To what extent

is the matter of the sacraments immutable? Could saki and rice be substituted for wine and bread? Or coffee and doughnuts?

Is anything essential to the Church by way of liturgical prayer? Must the Church continue to recite the Lord's Prayer?

Even if one admits a great measure of flexibility in theory, how much uniformity is practically desirable in order that the Church may continue to manifest the unity which Christ wills for it? Is a diversity of rites detrimental to the unity of the Church or does it on the contrary give added splendor to the spectacle of catholic unity?

4. Ethical teaching. In the past Christianity has closely identified itself with certain codes of conduct. It has insisted on a definite code of sexual morality, on monogamous marriage, and has taken an unfavorable attitude toward divorce, allowing it only under severe restrictions. The "mainline" churches have generally preached obedience and respect toward the civil government, extending even to military service. Radical Christians, on the other hand, have tended to oppose oaths of allegiance and to discountenance military service.

Today some feel that the Church's ethical codes have generally been too closely bound up with the approved social structures of the Mediterranean world at a given stage of its development. They feel that the Church has failed to raise a sufficiently strong voice of protest against war and social injustices (slavery, the class system, economic and political

tyranny). Some counsel drastic revisions of the Christian moral code to meet the exigencies of a new era; they call for a theology of revolution, not excluding violence. Demands are also being made for a revolution in Christian sexual ethics, which are considered too inhibitive.

In view of these pressures Christians must seriously ask themselves whether there are any "moral absolutes" - any objective standards of conduct to which men are universally and permanently bound. Are moral stances by their nature reversible, or can the Church affirm certain laws as immutable? If there are no limits as to what may be regarded as moral in some place or time, it would appear that the Church must disavow an important part of its mission as traditionally conceived. The problem here is similar to the problem of dogma: if there is a single determinate message, it ought to be capable of some kind of unequivocal expression. And yet it is exceedingly hard to win general and permanent acceptance for any given expression, even among those who consider themselves to be committed Christians.

In all four of these major areas, the problem arises as to the degree to which unity can be imposed by the decisions of competent ecclesiastical officers or bodies. When such bodies attempt to settle disputed questions, they almost inevitably find their decisions contested by significant minorities, if not by a majority, among the faithful. The churches seem to be caught in a dilemma between the paralysis of inaction and the

folly of alienating their own members. Now that the Church is generally viewed as a voluntary society, anathemas and excommunications no longer serve as effective sanctions. Can other procedures be devised which will enable the Church to bear witness courageously to the full gospel of Christ without making itself a tragic spectacle of inner division and conflict?

The problem of authority vs. freedom, unity vs. diversity affects different churches in different ways, and reappears with distinct modalities in various historical eras. But the problem itself is a necessary accompaniment of an ~~incarnational~~ religion such as Christianity. Every Christian community, large and small, has had to face the quandary: ~~how to reconcile~~ the "obedience of faith" with the necessary "freedom of the sons of God"; how to harmonize fidelity to Christ and the gospel with the effective evangelization of a given culture? To the extent that any body of Christians can solve this problem for ~~itself, it~~ will contribute to the vital realization of that unity-in-diversity which must characterize a reunited Church in the future for which all Christians pray.

Notes

1. "Findings of the National Faith and Order Colloquium on 'Salvation and Life'", Unity Trends 2/16 (July 1, 1969) p. 8.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 9.

4. "The Barmen Declaration," text in J. H. Leith (ed.), Creeds of the Churches (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1963) 520.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Cf. J. C. Murray, "Freedom, Authority, Community," America 115 (Dec. 3, 1966) 734-41.

8. Lumen gentium no. 1; in W. M. Abbott (ed.), The Documents of Vatican II (New York: Guild, 1966), p. 15.

9. E. Käsemann, Essays on New Testament Themes (Studies in Biblical Theology 41) (London: S.C.M., 1964), pp. 103-104.

10. "Sancta catholica apostolica Romana Ecclesia," Vatican I, Constitution Dei Filius; text in Denzinger-Schönmetzer, Enchiridion symbolorum (Freiburg, 32nd ed., 1963), no. 3001.

11. Lumen gentium no. 8; in Abbott, op. cit., p. 23.

12. Ibid., no. 13; Abbott, p. 32.

13. Unitatis redintegratio nos. 16-17; Abbott, pp. 359-60.

14. Gaudium et spes no. 42; Abbott, p. 242.

15. Ibid., no. 44; p. 246.

16. Ad gentes no. 4; Abbott, p. 588.

17. Sacrosanctum concilium no. 37; Abbott, p. 151.

— Community
— authority