
In 1995 Pope John Paul II issued his great encyclical Ut Unum Sint, inviting ‘church leaders and their theologians to engage with [him] in a patient and fraternal dialogue’ about the ministry of unity which had been entrusted to him as Bishop of Rome. Following this appeal, ten years of dialogue between Lutheran and Roman Catholic scholars, coming in the main from Scandinavia, Germany and North America, have produced an excellent group of essays (also including contributions from the Orthodox theologian Metropolitan John Zizioulas and the Methodist Geoffrey Wainwright) which will give great help to theologians of other traditions as they too tackle the issues of communion, primacy and authority.

Their starting point is set out by Peder Nørgaard-Højen in his introductory essay: ‘The object of disagreement is not that a ministry of unity is indispensable and that the unified church is in need of an authoritative instrument to express the one, catholic and apostolic truth – at least not in ecumenically open parts of our churches. The question, however, as to how and by whom this truth is to be formulated as well as the issue of the criteria of unity tear Christianity apart.’ Other essays make it clear that the question of how primacy is to be exercised in practice is at least as important as the question of how a doctrine of primacy is to be expressed in words. How have the decrees of the two Vatican Councils been put into practice? Has curial practice embodied a distorted understanding of the conciliar decrees?

The opening essays on Scripture and patristic tradition include a particularly illuminating account by Archbishop Roland Minnerath of the growing divergence between East and West in understanding Roman primacy during the course of the first millennium. That the Bishop of Rome had some kind of primacy was not in dispute. But what kind of a primacy? The first of two essays by Hermann J. Pottmeyer deals with the same issue. His second explores the concerns and debates that lay behind the decisions of Vatican I, seen in their historical context. A fateful development, going back into the Middle Ages but acquiring new resonance against the rising claims of the nineteenth century nation state, was the notion of the Roman pontiff as sovereign over the universal Church. ‘The dogmatization of the papal primacy as sovereignty was at the heart of the Ultramontane strategy in the battle for the freedom of the Church.’ The concerns of the minority at the
Council for a due acknowledgement of the rights of the episcopate and of the inherent limitations on papal authority were recognized during the conciliar debates; but there was a one-sidedness in the wording of the definition. ‘This one-sidedness of the definition itself subsequently enabled the maximalist interpretation of the primacy as absolute sovereignty to substantiate its claim on the basis of this dogma. In turn, the maximalist interpretation justified the increasingly centralist exercise of the primacy as the only form that complied with the dogma of 1870.’

The need for a re-reading or re-reception of Vatican I is raised once more by Hervé Legrand, another Roman Catholic contributor. He observes that the curial practice of recent years has turned its back on the balancing corrections of Vatican II by weakening the status of bishops and Bishops’ Conferences. He concurs with the judgement of Harding Meyer, a Lutheran contributor, when he says: ‘The possibility for the papacy to become an ecumenical theme does not depend only on its theological reinterpretation; it depends just as much on its practical reorganization ... For Catholics, primacy is not a concept; it is practice. And if it were not practice, it would be pointless.’

A closely related issue is the difference between those Roman Catholic theologians (here represented by Hermann J. Pottmeyer, Hervé Legrand, Joseph A. Komonchak and Cardinal Walter Kasper) who maintain that in a sound ecclesiology there is a relationship of mutual interdependence between local churches and the universal Church, and the recent assertions by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and its former head, the one time Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, of the absolute historical and ontological primacy of the universal over the particular. According to the latter view, the apostolic Church in Jerusalem is to be seen as, so to speak, containing all churches derived from it, rather than as the first of many brothers and sisters. As Legrand points out, this legitimates the use of episcopal orders to give status to curial officials as functionaries of the universal Church, thus undermining the traditional understanding of episcopal office as relating to the pastoral care of particular churches.

The possibility of a re-reading or re-reception of Lutheran history is raised by Lutheran contributors such as Harding Meyer and Eero Huovinen. They insist that it was the practice and not the theory of papal primacy that first aroused the opposition of Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon. Although they do not say so, the same could be said of the road that led to the abolition of traditional episcopacy in the Lutheran regions of Germany (I remember the shock of first seeing effigies of prince-bishops of Würzburg,