If I say that I am ‘under authority’, what am I asserting about myself? The centurion in the gospel, when he thus describes himself, is saying that he understands what it means to act freely so as to affect the fate of someone else in a decisive fashion, establishing certain things and excluding others, because he himself is so ‘affected’ by others and is in turn authorized to ‘affect’ those committed to his charge. ‘I am under authority’ means – among other things – ‘I am not the sole maker of my world; my possibilities are limited.’ Authority, in the most basic sense, has to do with precisely this limiting of options: authoritative phenomena (they need not always be verbal pronouncements: we can sensibly talk about ‘authoritative’ readings or performances of musical and dramatic works) provide a sharpening of definition which, explicitly or implicitly, points up areas of conflict and possible exclusion. Even in the aesthetic area, if I say that I find Grigory Kosintsev’s film of King Lear an ‘authoritative’ version of Shakespeare’s play, I am accepting that there are ways of reading the play that are now ruled out, or at least relativized, questioned or overshadowed, by Kosintsev’s – as far as I am concerned. To use another kind of image, what is ‘authoritative’ clarifies the distinction between the essential and the peripheral, and persuades me of the superior significance of certain features of the subject.
matter. Not all interpretations are of equal validity; not all are equally possible for me, therefore, once I have grasped some one interpretation as authoritative.

So to talk about authority as something which limits possibilities is to see it as giving definition. At the simplest level, to give an order to another person is to impose definition on his or her actions, to shape their future this way or that. And it is quite right to say, as the late Yves Simon does in his lucid monograph on the idea of authority,² that a great deal of the exercise of authority in the average human society is necessarily ‘arbitrary’, in that it defines the legitimate limits of citizens’ options on matters without any intrinsic significance (which side of the road we drive on, for instance). The significant reason for which one course of action rather than another is enjoined has nothing to do with any aspect of the action as such; it relates entirely to the desirability – in some circumstances, the practical necessity – of a common order for the sake of the common good. A state may allow theoretical freedom of conscience to its citizens as to which side of the road it is better to drive on, but even the most minimal grasp of the idea of ‘common good’ suggests that this freedom has to be severely limited in practice.

But of course authority in society is not uniformly like that. In indifferent matters, it does not much matter by what means authority is actually exercised, so long as there is some mechanism for the making of decisions. Other considerations arise when what is being ‘defined’ does have a significance of its own. Societies as they actually exist define ‘the common good’ in specific (and therefore arguable, controversial) terms; they operate with more or less explicit assumptions about what human welfare, harmony and fulfilment look like. Now in their attempt to achieve a closer approximation to their vision, they will necessarily take decisions which require for their implementation that certain human habits and attitudes can be relied on; and the problem comes when these habits and attitudes
that are taken for granted are directly in conflict with the overall human goals of the group. That is to say, if a society professes a commitment to participatory democracy and yet (in supposed defence of this ideal) organizes itself in a way that effectively disfranchises the mass of its population, its actual exercise of authority is impeding and not furthering its goals. The irony of a 'free world' putatively defended by nuclear weaponry is a case in point: nuclear policy has (at least until very recently) been conspicuously inattentive to the question of how far it is answerable to the community it purports to defend, and many would argue that the exercise of political authority in societies thus armed is inescapably undemocratic. Similar points could be made about a 'free' society which effectively took (takes?) for granted a situation of 'structural unemployment' in its exercise of authority in the economic realm.

But these are issues which would demand far more discussion to do them justice. The point is that any method of exercising authority which runs counter to the professed goals of a group is subversive of its own credibility: it is a lot harder to take seriously a society's claim to stand for liberty and co-operation if those values are not witnessed to in its present practice of government. And this very soon generates in such a society a profound disillusion - the loss of any sense of a moral significance inhering in the life of the community, and the decay of corporate life and enterprise. Means and ends are in fact far less easily separable in the political world than we are sometimes led to believe.³

2

Why spend so long in a theological essay on matters that may seem more properly to belong in political philosophy? Partly because 'authority' is, whether we like it or not, a political concept as soon as it is applied to the life of any community, and it may help us if we clarify in advance some of the dilemmas which arise in connection with it. Christians are liable to a certain naïveté (sometimes genuine, some-
times feigned) about the nature and exercise of power. It is perfectly true that power and authority are not identical; yet the common life of human beings involves authority, defining and limiting authority, being exercised, and this will involve reflection on means and ends, and so, inevitably, reflection on the appropriate use of power. It is naive (on the one hand) to say that the Church does not have anything to do with 'power'; and it is potentially disastrous to say (on the other) that the actual way authority works is peripheral - if the sacramental life of Christians, their sanctification in prayer and love, is going on, it doesn't really matter how the Church is organized. This is a very tempting viewpoint, especially for those quite reasonably exasperated by the institutional immobility of various Christian communions; but unfortunately it does bypass the question of means and ends. And it is capable of producing among Christians exactly the same sense of a 'loss of moral significance' in the life of the Church as large as occurs in secular society. The retreat into the Small Group is a simple solution, but one which runs against all that the idea of 'catholicity' has positively meant in the Church: the mutual critical openness of the local body and the wider structure, the reciprocal nourishment offered by particular local communities. And if catholicity matters, structures of authority matter.

The Church, as a community of human beings struggling to realize a particular vision of human welfare, harmony and fulfilment, requires that there be some way in which options can be made as to whether or not certain acts or styles of life are compatible with its vision, and some point at which clearer focusing of its goals is possible. It requires authority; but because of the nature of its goals, it requires authority of a particular kind, whose exercise is discernibly in tune with those goals, nurturing the humanity that is sought for. In all this, of course, there is nothing uniquely 'churchly'; it is only as we begin to consider more particularly the nature of the Christian goal or vision that
what is distinctive about Christian authority can begin to emerge.

3

The Christian gospel affirms that forgiveness occurs: people responsible for the hurt and diminution of others are not condemned to permanent lostness. If they own their acts in seriousness and in desire to do otherwise (in penitence), they are set free to belong to a community in which the constitutive reality is mutual gift and enrichment. The pivot of this self-recognition, this liberation and this new corporate life, the event which makes all this possible, is the ‘paschal mystery’ of the death and exaltation of Jesus: God’s blameless servant is the victim of a paradigmatic act of violence and rejection, but God ‘returns’ him to the world as the ultimate and decisive symbol of undefeated compassion and inexhaustible creative resource. Upon this gift hangs the possibility of the existence of a shared life of gift: that is what the Church is created and constituted to be.

So the ‘goals’ of the Church can be described in terms of the formation of a human community in which oppressive and diminishing relationships are transformed through the mediation of a controlling story or image. The human options available to the Church are limited by the force of this central symbol: cross and resurrection constitute an authoritative reality in the believing community. The Church’s limits are defined at the most primary level by its reference to an event in which violent power is judged and grace and mutuality are declared to be the fundamental ways in which God lives and is shown in the world. The Church’s gospel speaks of a transformation effected by recognition, ‘confession’ in both senses of the word: the acknowledgement of responsibility, and the acknowledgement of a firm commitment and trust; it is an invitation to see, and so depends upon a basic metaphor of unveiling and showing. In the Fourth Gospel, this is spelled out in the pervasive account of Jesus’ presence in the world and the Church as ‘light’; in
Paul and the Letter to the Ephesians (whether Paul’s or not, it is in this respect perceptibly a development of his characteristic concerns), the recurring language of the opening and revealing of the mysterion of God’s plan serves a similar purpose.

‘Showing’ is an effective, catalytic and transforming event, which draws new boundaries. That is to say, it is an authoritative event, yet also one which, in demanding responsible choice, implies that its authority cannot be coercively exercised. And to belong to the Christian community is to accept the paschal symbol as decisive: a showing of truth which challenges and involves, demands response, and is generative of new life, individual and corporate. From the beginning, acceptance of the gospel has not formally involved any act of submission to an administrative structure, but has taken the form of incorporation into a worshipping - a ritual-celebrating - group by means of an enactment of the Easter symbol in baptism: immersion and emergence, loss and recovery, death and life. And the act which both expresses and fosters the community’s coherence is again a ritual recovery of Easter (however much in its history it has been distorted into a recollection only of the cross): new life as gift, in the regular and repeated nourishment of a meal.

4

If this is true, the simplest and most central ‘authority’ in the Church is this authority of the symbol. It is a kind of authority connected intimately with the human goals of the Church in that those goals involve response and self-awareness and are not served by the abandonment of the capacity for freedom and discrimination. ‘Obedience’ to a symbol is a very different matter from obedience to a command. ‘We are saved by Christ’s obedience not because it was blind but... because it was unswerving and total response to perceived truth’; and that obedience itself becomes the symbol we must likewise obey. It is ‘perceived
truth' for us, and demands a response of like order, and like cost. To treat Christian obedience as a *sacrificium intellectus* is to trivialize it: the cost is deeper. There may have to be obedience to the paschal symbol when clarity and security, 'understanding' at the ordinary level, are all missing; but this depends on the basic trust that even this darkness in the symbol is fertile and creative, not upon a deliberate suspension of judgement and responsibility.\(^7\)

What limits our options is the symbol accepted as definitive. But we are not speaking of a static material symbol (Christians do not possess a Qur'an), rather of symbolic acts performed in particular historical communities of men and women. Baptism and the Eucharist do not happen independently of a tradition of their performance, passed on in a personal fashion; and they are 'orchestrated' in one way or another according to a wide variety of social and ideological constraints. Thus the authority of our baptismal and eucharistic symbols is actually encountered in a variety of practical ways, dependent upon the variety of people engaged in their celebration.

If this is so, it is both sociologically and theologically intelligible that the *persons* believed to exercise authority in the Church are those engaged most directly in the enactment of its symbols: the teaching authority of the bishop (or his delegate) is, in the early Church, inseparable from his role as eucharistic president. 'His primary function is always to make the catholicity of the Church reveal itself in a certain place',\(^8\) by being the focal point around which the community gathers, overcoming its divisions, to affirm a single identity governed by the paschal symbol in its eucharistic shape - 'catholicity' here being seen as the incorporation of the many into the one, the individual into the communal, the local into the universal.\(^9\) If authority belongs primarily to the symbol, it belongs derivatively to whoever gives that symbol concrete and coherent form. In early Christian practice, *only* the bishop baptized, just as only the bishop ordained, because it is only by reference to the single figure
in a district set apart to be himself a ‘symbol’ accessible to all, related to all, not representing only a sector of the community, that the actual limits of the Church can be discerned. Pragmatically, the Church was those who assembled round the bishop, those recognized by the bishop as having placed their lives under the authority of the crucified and risen Jesus.

5
But there is an obvious trap here (into which the Church has generally fallen). It is to see the sacramental authority of the bishop as that of the mystagogue, to whom is entrusted ‘guardianship’ of the sacred things; and the succession of ministerial order in terms of the passing-on of powers or prerogatives closed off to the rest of the community. Here authority depends upon the ability to manipulate symbolic language professionally: the symbol is the possession of, or at least the deposit entrusted to, a class in the Church. Thus authority comes to be seen as rule exercised by a ‘teaching’ body over a passive ‘learning’ body – ecclesia docens and ecclesia discens, the empowered and initiated over against the uninstructed.

But this is to make a nonsense of the role of the symbol itself. Precisely because we are speaking of a common symbol (the paschal event) which governs and unifies the whole community, there can be no mystagogic view of the minister lifting the veil from secrets hidden from the eyes of the multitude, by virtue of initiation into a privileged sacral caste. The paschal symbol is what brings the whole Church into being and draws multiple identities into a common one. In its ritual, the whole Church shows itself its source and its criterion; but no particular act of showing is of the same creative order as the paschal event itself, so that no act of showing has meaning independently of the generative event and the life of the community as a whole. That is, we do not have to do, in the sacraments, with a series of theophanies presented to a passive audience. In the rather
different language of Reformation controversy, there cannot be several sacrifices, repeated sacrifices, of Christ; because the community that celebrates is unified by reference to the one sacrifice, the one symbol, whose uniqueness is guaranteed by its historical particularity. The paschal mystery is indeed, in the Church, an 'open secret'.

So there can be no class of 'initiates' (the early Church rightly referred to all its baptized as mystai, initiates): an authority exercised by such a class over the rest of the Church would be subversive of the real authority of the symbol it claimed to safeguard, and thus, in undermining the symbolic mode of authority and the symbolic mode of obedience, would also subvert the human goals of the Church. Invitation and manifestation would be replaced by the inevitable domination of the instructed over the uninstructed: a class of permanently 'deprived' persons would be built into the Church, persons whose converted self-awareness could be mediated only by way of the expertise of the professional handler and performer of the symbolic. It is no surprise, then, if a revival of the corporate sense of the Eucharist goes hand in hand with a re-examination of the structures of clerical authority: or if the former fails to be realized (whatever the favoured rhetoric may be) when the latter lags behind.

In what sense, then, do we speak of the authority of the bishop-as-liturgist? Certainly if symbolic authority is primary in the Church, there cannot properly be forms of authority radically divorced from the sacramental context; but what does this mean in practice? If the bishop's function is essentially to enable the community to state in ritual form its unity in the crucified and risen Christ (and thus also its freedom from exclusively local prejudice and interest - its catholicity), he does not speak or teach 'authoritatively' in abstraction from the community at worship. 'There is no ministry in the catholic Church that can exist in absoluto.' And in the context of the community at worship, his speaking, teaching or acting must be
intrinsically part of a shared exploration into the Church's common identity. He may be focus or animateur of liturgy, but he cannot be a virtuoso soloist. The nature of his eucharistic role obliges him to be ministered to, to be nourished by the understanding of all. And his task is then to interpret these minstries, these contributions back to the Church, and to interpret different sectors to each other; to manifest to the Church its own multiplicity of ways of apprehending and responding to its governing symbol.

The bishop's authority, in other words, is an authority to unify: not an authority to abolish or minimize conflict within the community, but the task of referring all sides of a debate to the unifying symbol over whose ritual recollection he presides, in such a way as to show the face of strangers or opponents in the Church as Christ's face for each other. This means he also has the task of discriminating - of judging when some response to the gospel is incapable of being Christ's face. This involves no small risk, but it is one thing which saves such an exercise of authority from blandness: nothing can be gained by attempting to interpret as Christ's the face of naked racialism, militarism, or any comparable phenomenon which is of its essence opposed to the human goals of the Church.

Thus authority in the Church can operate positively when a bishop says to one group: 'Your opponents are also "in my communion". I recognize them as baptized, as having confessed Jesus as Lord, and I do so for such-and-such reasons. Listen to them, as they must to you. When you rupture your fellowship with them, you rupture your fellowship with me at the Lord's table.' Equally it can operate (less often, we may hope) negatively, if a bishop says to the community at large: 'Such-and-such a group has broken the fellowship of Christ's table by its attitudes, and I cannot see how it confesses Christ.' This is not necessarily to plead for the renewal of the discipline of excommunication (which is fraught with ambiguities) but at least to demand of communities and dissident groups within them
that they examine with candour whether their professed unity is really a common obedience to the paschal symbol.

In this way, the bishop’s authoritative role is to realize in the community he serves the ultimate significance of those patterns of mutuality, ‘the rejection of rejection’, gift and acceptance which are meant to characterize the body of believers in Jesus: it is for him to show how the face of the stranger can be a gift and not a menace within the Church. His exercise of authority, in manner and context, must serve the creation and growth of that community of gift which is God’s purpose for the humanity made in his image. And the bishop is equipped to do this because he is ‘put there’ by the Church to focus its unity in presiding at the common meal. At this level, he is (as we have noted) himself a symbol. He does not have power over the community, far less power over the symbol; rather he becomes part of the symbolic mediation by which the Church renews its encounter with what creates it and sustains it – the grace of Christ. And anything that needs to be said about succession, legitimation, continuity of tradition, and so forth must be spelled out in relation to this symbolic sense of ministerial order: if a bishop is truly to unveil the catholicity of the local church, he cannot depend for his ordination only on the local and the contemporary, he must visibly belong in a community extended in time and space beyond the local. But exactly what ‘conditions’ should be specified for this is not my immediate concern here.

Now by this time, some exasperated readers may want to ask, ‘What church are you talking about? and what bishops? These models may be very interesting in their way, but how do they relate to the present structures of any real church?’ This is fair enough: my ‘bishop’ may indeed be such a creature as never was on sea or land. But there is a place for sorting out a little what the inner coherences of the Church’s life involve, what sorts of ministry most clearly
belong with the professed purposes of the Church's existence, if only to prevent our assuming that whatever form of ministerial authority we presently have is un-criticizable, or that any form of authority which works must be defensible. In other words, I am reiterating a plea often made, that theology should have a properly critical role in the Church's view of itself. Its job is not to be merely descriptive.

It is true, though, that when we think of authority in the Church, we think first of the way it is actually exercised now in various Christian communions. Even those Eastern Orthodox writers who have done most to clarify the liturgical and symbolic basis of episcopal authority would admit that their account is by no means instantly recognizable in the present practice of their own churches. Yet it remains largely true that the Orthodox (and the non-Byzantine Eastern Churches) have felt less need than any other Christian body for structures of decision-making at a level other than the local, and will still wax eloquently abusive about the un-catholic character of a putatively universal authority. Is it sufficient to say that the 'local' church (and it is of course far from straightforward to define the limits of the local) should remit to its bishop (or, conceivably, a small group of bishops chaired by a 'metropolitan') the responsibility for policy-making in the Christian community, and not look for any wider or firmer ground of authority than the assurance that the bishop is recognized by his brothers in the episcopate?

Primitivist solutions are always seductive. But a complex and mobile society forbids us to rest content with this episcopal version of the Small Group ideology. When the Church exists in a wide variety of social situations, then, if we take seriously the understanding of catholicity as the transcending of the local and the idea of the Church as a community of mutual gift, the local church's representative must be actively and regularly engaged in interpreting his church to other churches, and vice versa. Of course this has
always been understood to be part of the bishop’s job; my point is that as the social and cultural diversity of Christians grows more marked, the interpretative gifts required demand far more regular and consistent exercise and education than ever before. In the early and medieval periods, the problem tended to be resolved by the relative cultural homogeneity of ecclesiastical bodies, confirmed by schisms whose roots were as much cultural as theological. Western Christendom had its common ground in the Latin tongue and the authority of the Curia; Eastern Orthodoxy in the political ambience of the Imperial Court, and a kind of Byzantine political-ideological-aesthetic vernacular; non-Chalcedonian Christianity (not that it faced grave problems of policy and doctrine in this period) in the common social situation of a religio-ethnic minority under Muslim rule.

Within these circles, the bishop’s interpretative work does not involve the demanding cross-cultural translations of a more pluralist situation. But in the later kind of situation, the bishop’s unifying authority within a community will depend in large measure on his sensitivity to the range of Christian options in the world at large, and thus upon his interpretative skills in this wider context. Hence the need for structures which permit precisely this kind of exchange, and which nurture and preserve a ‘catholic’ perspective in the bishop’s mind, enabling him, inter alia, to speak more clearly and powerfully on behalf of strangers and minorities within his own community.

But if this is true, any ‘consultative’ structures set up to facilitate this are not going to be in themselves authoritative organs of decision-making. They are there to serve the authority of the bishop as ‘catholic’ representative in the local church, in his own sphere of action, and in no sense to impose decisions upon him. They may remind him that to preserve his (and his community’s) openness to the wider life of the Church, he cannot act with a degree of independence that merely reflects an insensitivity to other attitudes and practices; but they are not there actively to
inhibit him, let alone to make policy for him. If a structure which (necessarily) exists at some distance from particular worshipping communities conceives itself to have a directive authority, it shows a misunderstanding of the sources of Christian authority. So that (to give, for once, a concrete and familiar instance) the Lambeth Conference is entirely right not to promulgate binding decisions but to concentrate upon the formation of general attitudes and perspectives. There are various ways of securing this kind of 'catholic' exchange in the service of a genuinely unifying authority at the local level, and it is immensely encouraging to see how the Anglican Communion is developing more channels for such encounters.

7

What then about the processes of decision-making in the local context? There is no obvious reason why a bishop should be involved in any and every administrative mechanism relating to the church in his district; but decisions and policies which affect the Church’s understanding of its boundaries and its goals will obviously require his engagement if the Church is conscious of being essentially a liturgical community (a community that utters, celebrates and symbolizes what it is). We have already seen that his authority is meaningless independently of what is actually happening and being said; so that it is pretty well superfluous to underline that he cannot properly act in an individualistic way. And again, this requires the development of structures, more or less sophisticated, which guard against his exercising an authority over the Church.

Here we encounter some very vexed questions indeed. Synodical government in the Church of England was created largely to provide just such a safeguard, to ensure that authority was exercised in a corporate, participatory style. The problem is that, as presently practised, it is heavily dependent upon a model of a 'parliamentary' kind; members represent constituencies, organize themselves in
blocs, legislate by majority vote, and vote by ‘houses’. All of this is (fairly) administratively tidy; but it is theologically untidy. It is reasonable that in a diocesan synod there should be represented both regional and ‘partisan’ interests, but it seems to me more questionable whether the present method of elections contested between candidates offering quasi-legislative programmes is the healthiest way of proceeding. Naturally, so long as a synod is seen as essentially a legislative body, it is inevitable that its membership should be relatively large in order to secure effective representation. But should it be? And when we come to consider the General Synod of the Church of England, the anomalies seem still sharper: it is a synod of two provinces, increasingly conscious of and jealous of its legislative powers; it is also expected to be a consultative forum for the discussion of complex ethical and theological matters. In the terms of this essay’s thesis, its authority is hard to locate in relation to the Church as worshipping community. It is desirable, certainly, to have some procedures in the Church for the settling of questions of canonical regularity, but I am still a little unconvinced by the parliamentary analogy (‘no taxation without representation’). Smaller groups, more regionally based, might be capable of co-ordination and, if necessary, ‘codifying’ disciplinary policy; and the ‘consultative forum’ aspect of a synod’s work could be freed from the legislative aspect – which would allow some rethinking on appropriate kinds of representation, and, above all, on the strange practice of voting by houses (as if bishops, other ranks, and laity were clearly defined ‘interest groups’), which does little to speak for the kind of genuinely corporate authority synodical government is meant to guarantee.

As for the diocesan level: can we imagine a situation in which a bishop (and perhaps a small body of consultants) actually formed part of several local policy-forming groups? This would at least underline the primacy of concrete local communities in working out their decisions for their own
life, in the presence of and with the aid of the 'catholic', the connecting, bridge-building, figure of the bishop. And to the objection that this would add intolerable burdens to the episcopal work-load, the simple reply is to invite serious reconsideration of the average size of the diocese. I am all too well aware that the 'bishop' of this essay, as focus for a regional community, is a fiction in the present situation of territorially enormous dioceses. The 'episcopal' function I have been trying to describe is in fact exercised by a variety of figures, including area deans and team rectors (the best account of episkope I have heard came from the vicar of a very large and variegated city centre parish, with a multiplicity of house groups, describing his work as a co-ordinator of existing ministries); and that may provide some food for thought.

All of this is speculative kite-flying, of course; but I am profoundly concerned that the way authority is actually exercised in the Church should have some degree of answerability to the specific nature of the Church as a community - that it should, in other words, be open to theological critiques. This essay has suggested certain grounds for criticism, but there are many other possible starting points. Not all would concur in my suspicions of centralized authority and representative legislature. And there remains one very important area of discussion related to this, which has to do with the kind of co-ordination appropriate between the plurality of church communities clustered around their episkopoi. Is there anything which 'holds the ring' for the ensemble of these communities, as a touchstone of catholicity? which is, in effect, to raise the question of papacy.

The Petrine office is regularly said to be to the whole Church what the bishop is in the local community: the interpreter of each to all, the focal point of unity. And the Roman Catholic is entitled to ask those outside the papal
foal (in the light of the none-too-encouraging history of Protestantism and of Eastern Christianity) how effective unity, authentically free exchange and communication and communion, can ever be realized without such a symbol, drawing the many into the one. Further, if the bishop’s role as symbol of unity defines his authority as authority to unify, the same is true of the Pope: in the Church at large, the Pope’s task is to refer all Christians to the single catholic truth, the paschal symbol.

This seems plausible (and it is, I think, quite close to what the 1977 ARCIC Report on Authority in the Church says about the papacy); but here are still some unresolved problems I should like to air. The first and most obvious is this: the bishop’s role in the community derives from his sacramental function as the one around whom the assembly gathers to celebrate; in what sense could anything comparable be said of the Pope? He is, in fact, bishop of a particular church, he is not without a sacramental role: but does he have a sacramental role vis-à-vis all the churches? Is this not in fact to risk de-catholicizing the local church as such, by implying that the true bishop of every church is the Pope (and Vatican I came very near to saying just that)? The problem is of course intensified by the heavily juridical imagery used since the early Middle Ages to describe the papal office, the Church being conceived as the domain in which the Pope is supreme magistrate.14

Various points might be made in reply. For instance, we might say that the real focus of unity is the church of the prime apostles, the Roman community that assembled first around the apostles of the circumcision and the uncircumcision, the first and the last witnesses of the risen Jesus. This is a community which, historically, acts as a sort of classical model for others: it is a paradigm assembly around the witnesses of the resurrection, a model of a community identifying itself through the paschal event. And so it makes sense to say that, derivatively, its bishop has a symbolic and paradigmatic role for all ‘episcopal’ assemb-
lies. Or the related point might be made that, if the most primitive assembly was gathered after Easter around Peter, when he had been 'converted' and restored by the risen Jesus, if Peter was indeed the foundation stone upon which the Church was established, then Peter's church and Peter's successor have the same status: now as then, the catholic Church is the church assembled round Peter.

Both these are serious theological proposals. The second, more specific, argument seems to me the more questionable, since it could be said that every bishop 'inherits' a Petrine role in this sense, and that anyway it is question-begging to think of one church, let alone one bishop, somehow repeating or continuing the work of the first apostle at Easter. The former and looser argument seems roughly to tie in with a good deal of what the Fathers of the first four centuries say about Rome (it is certainly worth stressing that Peter and Paul are equally important for such writers), and I suspect there may be more mileage in it. But on either showing, the corollaries fall short of a strictly 'papalist' view of authority. Neither argument gives any basis for supposing that the Pope has an authority definable in individual terms (any more than any bishop has), let alone that local bishops in any way derive authority from him. He in his church should show what episcopal authority ought to be in a community, because that community (for various reasons) began as a paradigm 'community of resurrection', drawing its sense of identity from the two great witnesses. And ideally (we could go on to say), just as decisions locally are not made without the bishop, the liturgical president, reflection in the Church at large on its nature and destiny should not be done without the Roman bishop. I have carefully avoided speaking of 'decision' in the Church at large, however, because (as I argued earlier on) supra-local structures should not be seen as basically decision-making bodies for the whole Church, even if, in exceptional circumstances, they may temporarily become so. Thus the papacy could be an indispensable sign of the true catholicity.
consultative (not legislative) structures in the Church: a 'council' which ignored the bishop of Rome would be an extremely suspect assembly – and again, patristic analogies could be adduced for some such formulation.

Once again, this is speculative. I think, though, that it is important to engage seriously with a theology of 'Petrine office' (allowing that it directs some pertinent criticism against, say, the purely pragmatic federalism of the Anglican Communion) but also to challenge the pervasively individualistic and unsacramental ways in which this office and its authority have been conceived. We need to subject to a rigorous critique the apparently unmodified commitment in the Roman Catholic Church to a belief in the symbolic uniqueness of the papacy in the Church's life, the insistence upon an individual charism different in kind from that of other bishops. The 'infallibilist' problem is still very far from a satisfactory resolution in the dialogue not only between Anglicans and Roman Catholics but also between the Orthodox (and non-Byzantine Eastern) Churches and Rome.

To sum up then: I have tried to argue (i) that the exercise of authority in any human society is without credibility if it frustrates the overall directing aim or vision of human life by which the society professed to live; (ii) that the primary source of authority in the Christian Church is a controlling symbol, liturgically appropriated, which speaks of the recovery of a self-aware responsiveness and the transformation of mutual threat into mutual gift: (iii) that it therefore makes sense to see authoritative decision-making in the Christian community as exercised by the worshipping group gathered around the symbolic figure of the liturgical president (the 'bishop' – in practice, often, the delegates of the bishop); (iv) that this specifies for the bishop a kind of authority which consists in interpretation, and the presentation as far as possible of mutual openness in the Church; and (v)
that non-local structures in the Church should see their primary role as enriching this local exercise of authority. Thus the bishop does not make decisions, doctrinal or disciplinary, alone: the Church decides, and the bishop's unique role is to guarantee that all the Church decides. And this led us to make some critical points about various non-local 'authorities', and to try to see how they might serve rather than dominate the local church.

Authority in the Church should constantly return us to our common authoritative symbol, to a contemplative receptivity to its challenge and its judgement. That symbol, I have said, is normally renewed for us in worship. But this is not to say that the symbol is only renewed here: John Drury points out that, 'Authority in the church has been exercised by Kierkegaard who ostentatiously sat in his club on Sunday mornings; by the lonely, ecclesiastically unassimilated figure of Charles Péguy; and by Simone Weil who doggedly and articulately refused baptism.' Receptivity to the symbol can involve us in hearing its judgement from those who are marginal to the Church's symbolic life - who are, rather, marginalized by the Church's failure to be what it sacramentally says it is, the community of gift. But we can only see such figures as authoritative if we already know and feel the contours of the paschal symbol from elsewhere - from the 'ordinary' life of the baptizing and eucharistizing community. The refusal of baptism can only be a significant deepening of our symbolic awareness if there is a residue of significance and integrity in the baptismal rite itself which enables us to see that in certain circumstances a person who turns away from baptism shows us more of what baptism symbolizes than the person whose reception of the rite is unreflective. Simone Weil speaks more authoritatively than many of the cost of self-loss and self-recovery.

Yet this is also to say that to speak of the authority of a Kierkegaard or a Simone Weil in abstraction from the abiding centrality of sacramental life in community is merely romantic: the 'authority' of heroic integrity alone
provides no substantial basis for a Christian view of authority. The great isolated figures of Christian history are answerable to the same symbol we are all answerable to, and their stature is assessed by reference to that. Otherwise we have a multitude of ‘Vatican I’ popes, not answerable to the Church at large; and it is important to note that the conspicuous absence in Kierkegaard and Simone Weil (Péguy is a very different case) of any theology of communion and interdependence is bound to qualify anything we say about their authority ‘in the Church’.

So we come back to the fundamental point of this essay: authority in the Church cannot straightforwardly be exercised by an individual ‘over’ a group. Understanding what fruitful patterns of Christian authority might look like has to do with understanding what is involved in loyalty or obedience to the symbol, the story, displayed to all: ‘Jesus Christ ... publicly portrayed as crucified’ (Gal. 3.1). Authority in the Church is the re-presenting, the lifting up of the Son of man reigning exalted from his cross, in word, life, and sign; its strength will always be in its fidelity to that, even (or especially?) when the lifting-up is the inarticulate or muddled or unpersuasive insistent childlike pointing of which Paul seems to speak. ‘I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God’ (1 Cor. 2. 2–5).

NOTES

1 Matt. 8.8; Luke 7.8.
2 A General Theory of Authority, (2nd edn, with a new introduction by Yukan Kuic), University of Notre Dame Press, 1980); see, e.g., pp. 40–41, 43–47.
3 It is a weakness in Simon’s argument that he rather underrates this dimension of the problem by assuming tacitly...
that the means of securing unanimity in areas where there is a legitimate plurality of ‘good ends’ is not of primary moral concern.


5 The declaration made by the Taizé ‘Concil des jeunes’ in 1971, demanding a Church ‘stripped of the means of power’, reflects a characteristic unclarity in this matter.

6 Nicholas Lash, op. cit., p. 112.

7 Ibid.


9 Ibid., p. 127.

10 Ibid. p. 128; cf. the argument of Edward Schillebeeckx in Ministry. A case for change (London, SCM, 1981), a work to which I am much indebted.


13 It is in this connection that we should view the recent creation of an Anglican Maori diocese in the Province of New Zealand - as a response to the need of a particular cultural group for ‘interpretation’ to the wider community, in a situation where the integrity and self-valuing of the subgroup is at a critical stage of articulation.

15 This is discussed most illuminatingly, with particular reference to the ambiguities of Vatican I, in Roland Minnerath, *Le Pape. évêque universel ou premier des évêques* (Paris, Beauchesne, 1978), esp. chs. 3 and 4. I am indebted to the Reverend Christopher Hill for drawing my attention to this work.

The final statement of ARCIC (Windsor 1981), *Authority in the Church II*, appeared too late to be referred to in the body of this essay. It is notable that here the discussion of primacy appears to be carried on with rather limited reference to the Pope’s position as bishop in a particular church; nevertheless, it makes it quite clear that the Pope is a member of the episcopal order (para. 11). Given this, it is odd to see so sharp a distinction drawn between the ‘universal primate’ and the ‘diocesan bishop . . . subject to his authority’ (para. 20; my italics), even when this authority is held to be *jure divino* only when exercised in some sort of ‘collegiality’ with other bishops.

16 This approach has most recently been restated, very cogently, in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology* (London, Collins, 1979), pp. 388–90.

17 In his editorial in *Theology*, May 1977, p. 162.