

# Other Christians Explore Pontiff's Role

(By Religious News Service)

The recent Anglican-Catholic commission's "agreed statement" on authority in the church — whether intended or not — has placed a new focus on the question of papal primacy and its relationship to non-Catholic Christianity.

The "Petrine function," one of the most sensitive and divisive areas of interreligious dialogue, was considered just a decade ago "too hot to handle" and far down the list of possibilities for ecumenical deliberation.

Yet, a Catholic participant in both the Lutheran-Catholic and Anglican-Catholic dialogues cites a new interest among Protestants in the papacy, "thanks to Pope John" who put forth the possibility that "one person could occasionally minister to the whole Christian community."

Father George Tavard, AA, who teaches at the Methodist School of Theology in Delaware, Ohio, said "we are discovering that theological objections to the papacy today have lost a great deal of weight" and that "the door is open for a new look at Church tradition and even papal teaching authority."

The priest's contention appears to have been borne out by the Anglican-Catholic commission's consensus which presented a "convergence" of views on how authority in the church has developed and how it relates to the Christian community, and that some kind of "universal primacy" should be exercised by the See of Rome, the city where Peter and Paul died.

While Anglicans, Lutherans and Orthodox Christians are generally viewed as more open to some form of papacy, particularly as an embodiment of servanthood, the possibility of a "pope for all Christians" has been envisioned by some other Christians as well.

Not all are so open. The Southern Baptists, of the major Christian bodies in the U.S., are completely closed to the authority of a pope, or any centralized authority for that matter.

Dr. Robert McAfee Brown, noted United Presbyterian theologian and ecumenist, has declared that "the reunion of a tragically divided church will not come without some breakthrough on the understanding of the papacy." And, he added, "too much has happened ecumenically in the last 15 years to allow us to assume that not much will happen in the next 15. . . The Spirit still lives."

In effect, he said, there have been three important "breakthroughs" in understanding the papacy — the impact of Pope John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council, and the "furor" resulting from the 1968 papal encyclical, which "demythologized a certain view of papal authority."

Significantly, in recent years, several spokesmen for Protestant and Orthodox traditions have expressed the view that they could live quite comfortably with a view of papal authority now articulated by many Catholics. Such a view involves "taking into account" Scripture, conscience, devotional life, and a tradition — in addition to individual papal pronouncements.

At the same time, the Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility appears to be a major stumbling block for those who can envision some type of papal primacy of service.

Father John Meyendorff, an Orthodox priest who teaches at St. Vladimir's Seminary in Crestwood, N.Y., conceded that ecumenical dialogue has been enhanced because primacy and authority have been related to the "very content of the Gospel." But he strongly denied that "an infallible papacy" can be part of the dialogue.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a converging opinion among non-Catholic Christian scholars that the papacy has certain "unifying" aspects.

On the other hand, there is a significant body of opinion among Catholic scholars that certain aspects of papal primacy, authority in the Church, and even the controversial doctrine of papal infallibility can be refashioned or perhaps substantially modified.

The Rev. Joseph Burgess of the Lutheran



The plaza in front of St. Peter's in Rome.

Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pa., said in the theological anthology "A Pope for All Christians?" that Lutherans in modern time have come to "appreciate the papacy's historic assertion of the right of the Church to be free from state control, the impact of modern popes on social questions, and the efforts for world peace made by modern popes."

However, he stressed that Lutherans could only accept the papacy "when it is reinterpreted in such a way that it is subordinate to the Gospel and the unity of the Church of Christ." He added that "for our part, we Lutherans cannot deny that God may show again in the future that the papacy is His gracious gift to his people."

Another Lutheran scholar, Dr. George Lindbeck of the Yale Divinity School, put it another way. "The possible functions of the pope for non-Roman Catholic churches are described as symbolic and pastoral. The pope could serve as a sign of unity, perhaps as a spokesperson for all when all are agreed, and as a center of communication and of mutual admonition, correction and encouragement."

Writing in the Summer 1976 edition of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, he said Lutherans acknowledge that the papacy is the "leading candidate" as an "institutional symbol of unity of the whole church," providing that "it is genuinely reformed."

He added that Lutherans must be "open to the possibility that the next age of the Church may belong to a reformed and Gospel-centered papacy; but to this it must immediately be added that there are at present to Lutheran eyes no clear indications that this will be the case."

Cardinal Jan Willebrands, a Dutch prelate who heads the Vatican's Secretariate for Christian Unity, told an ecumenical gathering at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., last year that he "drew hope" from the official Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the U.S. in which Lutheran participants have indicated they might accept some form of the papacy if it is renewed and structured under the Gospel and if freedom is guaranteed.

He contended that the papacy no longer constitutes the obstacle to reunion it once did.

In Montreal last July, the first Canadian Anglican-Catholic conversations on the primacy of the pope reached what was described as a "substantial agreement" and acknowledged that if unity was achieved Rome would be the acknowledged primal See of Christianity.

Dr. Eric Jay, retired dean of divinity at McGill University said, "a great number of Anglicans would readily accept the primacy of the pope, given formal agreement on doctrinal statements about such things as the Eucharist and the priesthood." He added that a change of attitude has emerged in the Anglican Church because of a steady decline in suspicion of Rome over the past 200 years.

A leading Presbyterian spokesman, Dr. Ross MacKenzie of Union Theological Seminary in

Richmond, Va., told a conference that many Protestants today believe that the papacy could be reformed in such a way that "its true power lay not in any theory of continuity as such but in its pastoral character."

He warned that the Reformed Churches will never seek unity with Rome "if they must abandon the liberties and rights of conscience" acquired through the Reformation.

When it comes to specific recommendations concerning a "reformed" or "renewed" papacy, a variety of models have been proposed.

A member of the Anglican-Catholic dialogue, Dr. J. Robert Wright, has suggested that "a limited papal primacy" would function as a "primacy of Love, implying both honor and service." He sees the papacy as "strictly functional . . . although placed within the context of trust and hope in God's providential guidance of the Church, and of the need for Spirit-filled discernment of good from bad."

Eastern Orthodoxy, while it agrees with Roman Catholicism on the fundamental "equality" of all local churches, "continuity with the Church of the Apostles," adheres to a model of primacy which "depends on the consent of the Church" as exercised by the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople.

Orthodox Christians claim that papal primacy, through its jurisdictional and teaching role, rules out collegiality of the bishops and the fundamental equality of the local churches.

Father Tavard, in commenting on the role of the pope as "spokesman for the whole church," said that in such a function he would continue in his traditional role as head of the Roman Catholic communion, but would exercise another type of leadership for the larger Christian community.

He said in this way the pope would simply serve as a focal point for gatherings of Christian leaders on crucial world issues and act as their spokesman in situations of urgency.

Dr. Brown has observed:

"What is important today, if the pope is to minister truly to a starving and oppressed world, is to conceive of the papacy as the embodiment of servanthood. . . the style of servanthood is the only appropriate style for the Christian family today, and also for the one who is claimed by millions as the head of their particular branch of that family."

A significant aspect of the continuing dialogue is reflected in the words of Father Irene Neaubien, SJ, director of Montreal's Catholic Center for Ecumenism.

He said recently, "the Anglicans are willing to consider the notion of primacy in the sense of their own view of primacy toward the Archbishop of Canterbury and to historically consider Rome as the oldest See in the Church. It's only a first step, but the beauty of it is that we are willing to continue in the dialogue towards unity."