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THE ROLE OF THE POPE

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"THE PROTESTANT FAITH"

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On the ninth Anniversary of Pope Paul VI, a Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney preached a sermon in St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral in which the Bishop restated with admirable clarity the basic distinctive doctrine of the Roman Catholic church, namely, that the Pope exercises absolute jurisdiction over the minds and consciences of members of the church.

We all know that a good deal of change has taken place in the Roman Catholic church recently, and real friendships are being established across the denominational barrier; important changes have taken place within the church such as the substitution of English for Latin in the Mass and the encouragement of private Bible reading. But the essential doctrine of Roman Catholicism is the jurisdiction of the Pope and there has been no change in this whatever.

There still remain very many errors and vagaries in the Roman Catholic religion when tested by the bible, such as transubstantiation, the sacrifice of the mass, auricular confession, purgatory, prayers to the saints, compulsory celibacy, and so on; but growth of Bible reading in the Roman Catholic church has shown up these errors to the minds of many Roman Catholics who are anxious to correct them and to bring their denomination more under Holy Scripture; but the barrier to all change and correction is the jurisdiction claimed and exercised by the Pope. Till this is radically modified there is no hope in the long run for reform in line with scripture within the Roman Catholic church.

28 MAY 1979

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The sermon to which I refer is directed against those within that denomination who are unhappy with this lack of reformation and are therefore, naturally, directing their criticism against the office of the pope which alone stands in the way of reform, not against the man but against the office.

The sermon was reported in full in the Catholic Weekly, July 6th 1972. In it the bishop said "such people want to reduce the Pope's primacy of universal jurisdiction to a mere primacy of honour" "moved by a misguided spirit of independence, fed by the spirit of our times, they unashamedly harass the vicar of Christ at every turn, trying to restrict evermore his Christ given authority".

In reply to these movements within the Roman Catholic church the Bishop restated the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of the Pope's jurisdiction. To Peter and so to the Pope "was given the primacy of strict jurisdiction over the whole church and over every individual member of the church, no matter what his position may be. To him was given the solemn and awesome power to bind and loose the consciences of men in the name of Christ Himself. To him was given the mandate to teach authentically, as Christ's continuing voice, all matters that pertain to man's salvation".

Here it is explicitly stated that the Pope stands in the place of Christ, with the right to direct, if he so will, every action, of every member of the church, whether he be king or commoner "Strict jurisdiction over every individual no matter what his position may be". "In the name of Christ ...

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as Christ's continuing voice", the Pope binds man's consciences in what they should do and binds their minds in what they should believe.

The Bishop went on: "possessing the fullness of the power entrusted to the church by Christ it is the Pope's proper function to order, direct, and co-ordinate the whole of the church's activity. He holds the primacy not only in matters of faith and morals but also in all matters of church discipline and government". The Bishop explained: "the teaching authority of the Pope is by no means restricted to solemn circumstances of infallible pronouncements, which are rare ... we must stress emphatically the plain truth that it does not take an infallible pronouncement from the Pope to bind gravely the consciences of the members of the church. He may do so in an encyclical or in any way he wishes ... When by virtue of the mandate given him by Christ he demands assent and binds consciences, it is Christ who demands and binds". The consequence of this doctrine is to substitute the voice of the Pope for the voice of Christ in scripture. So long as this doctrine is held it is impossible to expect any permanent reform along scriptural lines, within the church of Rome. Individual Roman Catholics may read the Scripture, may come into a living relationship with God through them, may have their conscience instructed by the scriptures, but then they are required to resubmit their minds and consciences to the Pope's teaching as soon as he speaks for as the bishop put it, he is "an unerring authority left perpetually on earth to preserve the teachings of Christ in all their purity and integrity, and to interpret them authentically ... when he

demands assent and binds consciences, it is Christ who demands and binds". So the Pope's word is the living word of Christ, that is, the living word of God Himself. While this doctrine is held it is impossible for scripture to work any work of reformation. Papal jurisdiction puts the sensitive Roman Catholic Christian into an impossible position. Through reading the Bible, as he is now encouraged to do, he will come to know what God's will is, yet if the Pope subsequently issues an encyclical on the subject, he is required to believe that, in conscience, even though it is agreed that it is not an infallible document, while scripture is. St. Paul told the Thessalonians (11. 2:4) that the time would come when a man whom he described as the 'man of sin' would be revealed, who would sit in the temple of God and give himself out as God. What can this prophecy mean except that there will be someone who claims to speak as God and to rule the consciences of God's people who are God's temple. The Petrine office, so called, that is the Pope, not the individual man but in his official capacity, fits St. Paul's prophecy. We are not surprised then that the Reformers called the papacy Antichrist. We do not use this sort of language today, but we ought to understand the concept. The papal claims, so clearly re-enunciated in this sermon, are anti-christian. They are opposed to the spirit of Christ who speaks through His word. At the moment they are binding the Spirit of God bringing about a reformation within the church of Rome. As a result of the reading of the scripture there are many Roman Catholics who are spiritually minded, converted Christians. They are seeking to bring the practice and teaching of their church more into accordance with the Word of God written

in the Bible. The papal jurisdiction stands athwart this path. Naturally, therefore, these people are unhappy with it and it is this unhappiness and unrest that has evoked this very clear re-affirmation of the papal office.

Many years ago Archbishop Cranmer (long before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, when he was still a private Christian) began to pray that the papal jurisdiction might be removed from England. He lived to see that prayer answered, though he died as a result of the temporary reintroduction of the papal jurisdiction by Queen Mary Tudor. We ought all to pray earnestly at the present time that God will continue His work of grace and remove this papal jurisdiction from the world completely, by the Pope himself with the whole Roman church abandoning it, so that in its place God's Word might rule over Christian consciences irrespective of denomination, so that Christian unity will be based in devotion to Christ and alertness to his teaching rather than by adherence to an external ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

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