

FORWARD IN FAITH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, 14 NOVEMBER 2015

COMMUNION, CATHOLICITY AND A CATHOLIC LIFE: STATEMENTS BY THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS OF THE SOCIETY

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1

In his great encyclical ‘on commitment to ecumenism’, *Ut unum sint*, Pope (now St) John Paul II, recalled with approval the well-known saying of Pope (now St) John XXIII: ‘What unites us is much greater than what divides us.’ (*UUS*, 20) It’s a line that’s often used these days in secular and cultural circles. But it’s worth recalling that they are in fact words of a pope, speaking about the divided churches, and they express a conviction in the heart of that great pope which led him to call the Second Vatican Council, the fiftieth anniversary of whose closing session will be celebrated in just three weeks time.

2

To Anglican ears, aware as we are of the recent tensions and fragmentations in our own local and international life (not to mention the promise of future difficulties yet to come), the pope’s affirmation that ‘what unites Christians is much greater than what divides’, is at least poignant, even ironic. We don’t easily feel it. But that doesn’t stop it being true. It is one of the most significant achievements of the ecumenical movement that Christians are able, to a degree previously unthinkable, to give an account of the basis of their unity – those things they can already make visible together, and those things that will require more prayer, repentance and dialogue before a united witness can be given.

Paradoxically, this ecumenical achievement now comes to our aid as Anglicans who desire to be obedient to the living tradition of the Church. Because it provides us with perspective by which we can understand the situation in which we find ourselves (where certain kinds of division which used to be outside our Anglican life are increasingly part of it); and it gives us tools to help us discern how we can live and flourish, and give our witness with integrity. Naturally we should also look to the genius of Anglicanism itself to help us—to all the spiritual gifts that God has poured out on the English church since its foundation, including in the past 500 years; since, as Pope John Paul and Archbishop Robert Runcie said in their famous joint declaration in 1989, ‘Even in the years of our separation we have been able to recognize gifts of the Spirit in each other.’

3

My **task** this afternoon is a (relatively!) simple one: to present to this Assembly the thinking of the Bishops of The Society in their recent statements *Communion, Catholicity and a Catholic Life*. In them we try, in what we believe is a classically Anglican and recognizably catholic way, to address our new context with teaching and pastoral guidance by giving new vocabulary for conversation both with one another and with those in the Church of England who take very different views.

4

Before saying more let me say something about the **process** of drafting and consultation that lies behind the statements so that you can get some sense of their genesis and our way of working. The initiative came from the Forward in Faith Council. Mindful of the emerging new situation—with the ordination of women as bishops on the one hand, and the gathering

reality of The Society on the other—the Council of Forward in Faith asked the Council of Bishops of The Society, as teachers and pastors, to revisit the topic of ecclesial communion and to share their teaching and guidance. The initial drafting was an attempt to capture a lively and long conversation at one of our regular Council meetings. First we asked for that initial drafting to be shared and tested with the retired bishops of The Society, and also with a selection of clergy and lay people from Forward in Faith and the Catholic Group in Synod. Following their comments, and a certain amount of redrafting, the statements were shared formally with the Council of Forward in Faith, as a way of consulting with representative clergy and laity in the Catholic movement. Their comments were reported to the bishops at their July meeting. They revised the statements in the light of those comments and signed them off for publication. Throughout we were aware of a double focus: wanting to respond to the needs of parishes and groups who look to us as bishops, but also to make ourselves accountable to the rest of the Church of England and indeed the rest of the Church beyond. The text has since been shared by our chairman with all the serving bishops of the Church of England, and the range of reaction to date has been almost entirely appreciative both among those for whom it was written, and from those who do not agree but who genuinely seek to find a positive and peaceful outworking of our new context.

Before trying to spell out the sequence of thinking in the first statement, I want to mention two things that lie behind the Statements.

5

First, some **deep background**.

In the last hundred years or so there has been growing ecumenical agreement about what the Church of God actually is. It's touched upon in the opening quotation from Dom Gregory Dix. The Church is not an organization or institution, even if its presence in the world bears some of those marks. No: it is a community reconciled to one another in the risen Christ, sharing through him in the fullest imaginable communion of life with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the new creation. Sharing in their communion, which the Holy Spirit makes possible in the body of the risen Christ, is for human beings (to quote the sixth-century writer Boethius) both 'our journey and our journey's end'. Through the sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist, God transforms our individual lives 'in communion' with him in the Church. Baptism is the basis of communion with God, and it is the only sure visible boundary of the Church. The Eucharist is its fullest expression and summit, and shapes the Church at every level. This understanding of salvation and communion has been key to thinking about the Church like no other in the last century. So it is no surprise that it should frame your bishops' teaching and guidance to you now. And in the Statement you will find references from many ecumenical sources.

6

Second, there is some **more immediate history**.

Some time ago, to the real dismay of those of us who consider the Anglican Communion and its heritage to be a gift of God to the Church as a whole, the Church of England failed at the level of dioceses to endorse the Draft Anglican Covenant. Nonetheless we have, recently, been able to enter into a kind of covenant, a binding agreement, within the Church of England, enshrined in a House of Bishops' Declaration. The intention behind the Declaration is to relate in a single ordered body those who (on the grounds of theological conviction) accept and those who cannot accept the ministry of women bishops and priests. As you know, one of the Declaration's five guiding principles (no.3) concerns discernment of the question in the wider Christian tradition. It is the most outward facing of the principles. In it the

Church of England's decision that 'all orders of ministry are open equally to all, without reference to gender' is recognized to be set, *as a matter of principle, remember*, 'within a broader process of discernment ... within the whole Church of God', and it names those churches with whom Anglicans claim to share the apostolic faith and historic succession. The principle doesn't claim any certainty that changes in the Church of England's sacramental practice or theology will eventually be received by the Church as a whole. So in the present situation our commitment—indeed our obedience¹—to the Catholic consensus means remaining faithful to the historic 'teaching and tradition' of Anglicans, which we believe are substantially 'recognizable' by the Church at large.

This brings me, then, to the theological sequence of the bishops' work – set out in the first statement.

7

In the **first** chapter we affirm that the universal Church is, in St Cyprian's words, 'a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.² The Church, as we've just said, is the community in which God transforms our individual lives 'in communion' with him. It is an invitation addressed to all Christians in every age in spite of their historical divisions.

But the communion Christians share is not invisible and disembodied; it is visible, recognizable and incarnate. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, 'the body of Jesus Christ is a visible Body or else it is not a body at all';³ and it's a visibility that increases as communion deepens and broadens. In the ARCIC dialogue, Roman Catholics and Anglicans especially have been able to agree and enumerate all the key elements that constitute full visible communion between churches, qualities that each must have for there to be full communion between them, including the ministry of oversight which ensures that unity and communion are expressed and fostered at every level.⁴

8

The **second** chapter is closely linked to the first and says that the clergy and parishes of The Society, gathered around the bishops who are entrusted with their oversight by means of the Declaration, seek to be an expression of many if not all the features of full visible communion. We do not claim any higher ground or a 'safe territory' set apart, but what we offer is an act of witness in the Church of England to the priority of God's purposes of catholic fullness and unity, and to the need for clarity about what can be positively recognised in others, as much as about what isn't certain.

¹ From the then Archbishop of Canterbury's speech closing the debate on women bishops, General Synod, 9 February 2006: "People have talked at times about differences of opinion and how the Church can live with differences of opinion. I think that the problem for those who are not content with the idea that we should go forward along the line of ordaining women as bishops is not one of opinion, it's rather of obedience. It's one of obedience to scripture, or obedience to the consensus of the Church Catholic. And, while that's not a view I wholly share, I think we ought to recognise that that's where it comes from, that those who hold that are not just thinking 'this is a matter of opinion' and therefore it is rightly and understandably a lot harder to deal with dissent if you're talking what fundamentally comes down to a question of whether you obey God or human authority. That's why it's serious, that's why it's difficult. More than opinion."

² Cyprian, Oration on the Lord's Prayer, end of para 23; see also LG 4.

³ *Cost of Discipleship* (1937), p. 225

⁴ See *Church as Communion* (1991), 45, which may be read in the light of the 1964 conciliar documents, *Lumen gentium*, 8: 'This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, ... although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found *outside* of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.' And *Unitatis redintegratio*, 13: 'Among those in which Catholic traditions and institutions in part continue to exist, the Anglican Communion occupies a special place.' Similar expressions can be found in individual Orthodox theologians too.

9

Which moves us into the crucial **third** chapter, and the challenging idea of the ‘highest possible degree of communion’ (mentioned in the fifth Guiding Principle). To be sure, changes in the episcopate have significantly reduced the visibility and recognizability of the Church of England as a church ‘founded on the Gospels and on the ancient common traditions’⁵; nonetheless many catholic features can still be positively recognized and nurtured. We have not, as a church, simply been reduced to a ‘baseline’ of common baptism. As the Statement says (and not for the first time in recent Anglican history) the harm done to the reality of our communion by recent changes is best likened to a localized tear in the fabric of teaching and relationships rather than a complete tearing apart, like a split or fracture. And here the language used jointly by popes and archbishops of Canterbury,⁶ about Anglicans and Roman Catholics already sharing a communion that is ‘certain yet imperfect’ and ‘real but incomplete’, is very helpful. The challenge now to everyone in the CofE is to work out what the highest possible degree of prayerful fellowship, service and mission will look like between those who are not in full communion.

10

The **fourth** chapter reminds us that as Anglican Catholics in this context we have a witness to offer: the witness of being a part of the wider Church, not claiming to be the definitive face of the Church. The sin of schism may be defined as the refusal to act as part of the whole, to be part of the whole – ‘part of the one holy catholic and apostolic’ as our Declaration of Assent says. Our witness in the Church of England will involve, among other things, recalling other Anglicans to their part in the wholeness and fullness of the Church universal, and their accountability to it.

11

The **fifth** and shortest last chapter reminds us that communion in Jesus Christ is a demanding and outgoing enterprise of discipleship to the point of sacrifice, and its reality is tested by our service of the poor and the powerless.

On the day of my ordination as bishop I opened my homily at Benediction in this church with words from Metropolitan Anthony Bloom: ‘We should try’, he said, ‘to live in such a way that if the Gospels were lost, they could be re-written by looking at us.’ The Gospels ... re-written by looking at *us!*? In that brief sentence we come full circle and touch again what the Church is: not an organisation, not an association for humanitarian or secular purposes, but a living body, a communion of sisters and brothers in the body of Jesus Christ, who unites all in himself. It’s a body, I went on to say, in which love has the primacy and only service has real authority. And that must mean that, as St Paul reminds us, we must ‘put away from [our] life all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice’ (Eph 4.31). Dear Friends, that is a way of life from which we are called to turn away.

12

So, to sum up the theology. All Christians *are* in communion: but communion to *different degrees*.

- First there’s baptismal communion: in other words, the unshakeable basis of life in Christ, which already gives all Christians access to the communion that God gives and calls us to.

⁵ From the Joint Declaration of Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey, 24 March 1966.

⁶ Quoted in footnote 14

- Second there's full communion: in other words, the environment of assured visible, sacramental and holy community in the Church, which in our case we modestly hope is recognizable to other catholic Christians.
- And, between the two, we have the idea of degrees of communion and even 'the highest possible degree of communion': in other words, here's real potential for relationship in Christ short of full communion, where some features of what it means to be the Church are positively recognizable, even if others are not.

13

Perhaps I should add here that some of this theology lay behind the 1994 Statement on Communion crafted by our forebears. But it was expressed then, understandably perhaps, in terms of a pulling back, a withdrawal after great changes had been made to the priesthood. Now we want—indeed we are challenged by our bishops and by the Church of England—to step forward, to use the provisions of the Declaration, and to thrive as loyal Anglicans.

14

What then are the practical implications of all this for our real lives in communion with other Christians? (These things are dealt with in the second statement.) I want to answer the question using the distinctions I've just spelled out.

First, baptismal communion, which we've come to recognize clearly in ecumenical dialogue.

We rejoice that we are called alongside the colossal variety of baptized Christians across the world, 'whom no man can number', to be changed as disciples of Jesus Christ into to a single community of faith and love.

Second, full communion, which the Church of England traditionally safeguarded for all its communicant members prior to the changes made to holy order.

We rejoice that the CofE is newly committed to 'enabling' catholic 'teaching and tradition' 'to flourish within its life and structures' in parishes, duly entrusted to the oversight of Society bishops, and living the visible sacramental life that has its source and summit in the Eucharist. This, the Society bishops say, is the ordinary and typical setting for all aspects of our visible sacramental life: for receiving Holy Communion, for the ministry of episcopal and priestly oversight, for confirmations and ordinations (including, we hope, deacons), for the shared mission and formation of the clergy (including concelebration). This visible communion will be the engine of visible flourishing parishes. But we shall not have the chance if PCCs do not pass that new Resolution. We bishops can only have oversight where our ministry is properly assigned by the diocesan bishops. That is the real priority for the coming twelve months.

And, third, between these two, the 'highest possible degree of communion', which has long been our commitment ecumenically, but which is now a reality at closer quarters - between Anglicans.

We cannot approach this without the sense of penitence that accompanies any Christian division. But we can also approach it with confidence, knowing that God calls us to reconciliation. There are a great many things that we can and must do in our dioceses and deaneries – especially in prayer and discipleship, mission and service. And those synodical decision-making structures mustn't be neglected either.

But what about the sacraments? Well, we should remember that occasionally, in special circumstances—and here no one can be compelled—it would not be wrong to receive holy communion where the celebrant himself is known to be a priest or bishop in the historic succession. And do not forget, the Declaration’s challenge to us, your bishops (para. 28) is quite strong. Life is not simple high up in the clouds of the episcopate, I can tell you! In such circumstances you must ask yourselves, as we ask ourselves, ‘What here is positively recognizable?’ and try to be at peace about what is not. It is possible to act with both love and discipline.

15

In that spirit I want to finish with a comment that Fr Yves Congar, the great theologian of Vatican II, records in one of his essays on Christian diversity and division. He quotes a famous French essayist of the early 20th century. ‘By all means let our ideas be clear; let us present them in all their rigour. For this is a condition of *honesty*. Let us serve them with all our might. For this is the exercise of our *courage*. But, just as we leave a margin on our writing paper for revisions and corrections and for everything not yet found, and for the truth for which we can still only hope, let us leave around our ideas the margin of *fraternity*.’⁷

Thank you.

⁷ ‘La marge de la fraternite’, *Figaro*, 2 Jan 1951