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# Ordination of Women

in the Anglican Communion and  
the Ecumenical Debate

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## I. Historical Introduction

The Anglican Communion is made up of autonomous churches and provinces which are in full communion with one another. It has two principal organs of consultation: the Lambeth Conference, at which, for over a century, the Bishops of the Anglican Communion have met about every ten years, and the more recent and much smaller Anglican Consultative Council, of Bishops, Clergy and Laity (ACC) which has so far met at Limuru in 1971, Dublin in 1973 and Trinidad in 1976. Both of these bodies are consultative, that is to say they cannot, and do not, take decisions on faith and order, on doctrine and practice which would bind any of the provinces/churches. The views they express carry considerable weight and moral authority. But the decision on, for example, whether or not to ordain women lies with a particular church/province, though it may seek advice from other churches in the Anglican Communion.

This particular matter has, on two occasions, been placed before the rest of the communion by the situation in the Diocese of Hong Kong. During the war, in order that the Anglicans in Macao might not be deprived of the sacraments, the Bishop of Hong Kong and South China, R. O. Hall, in 1944 priested Deaconess Florence Lee Tim Oi. But in 1946 the Bishops of the Anglican Church in China (of which Hong Kong is a diocese) having regretted the uncanonical action of Bishop Hall, Deaconess Lee resigned. However, the Diocese proposed to the Church's General Synod a Canon providing that for the period of twenty years from the adoption of the Canon, a deaconess might be ordained to the priesthood, subject to certain conditions: unless re-enacted, the Canon would lapse at the end of the twenty years though the women so ordained would continue their ministry for their life time.

The Synod took no action on this proposal but referred to the 1948 Lambeth Conference: "The *question* whether or not such liberty to experiment within the framework of the Anglican Communion would be in accordance

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with the Anglican tradition and order." The Bishops said "The Conference feels bound to reply that in its opinion such an experiment would be against that tradition and order and would gravely affect the internal and external relations of the Anglican Communion". (Resolution 113.)<sup>1</sup> The precise form of the question addressed to the Lambeth Conference should be noted. It did *not* (as is clear from the report of the committee on the Canon) concern "the *principles* upon which that tradition and order rested" but dealt rather with the nature and extent of permissible liberty to experiment in relation to that tradition and order. Parts of that committee's report are illuminating in view of subsequent events and may usefully be quoted.

It will be agreed that there has been in many respects considerable "liberty to experiment" within the Anglican Communion, and that many experiments can fairly be regarded as "in accordance with Anglican tradition and order". Three members of our Committee, belonging to the Church in China, would maintain that since Anglican tradition and order are based on the autonomy of national churches, the adoption of the experiment proposed in the Church in China for a twenty-year period of testing should be regarded as a proper exercise of autonomy not entailing any breach of fellowship. But the Committee is clear that to make the experiment now under consideration would be to transgress against that "tradition and order", and they therefore feel obliged to give the answer "no" to the question asked. They have been made aware of the special conditions prevailing in China and, in particular of the high standing and wide opportunities of women there. But it seems to them plain that an experiment of so radical an order could not properly be made without the fullest previous consideration by the Anglican Communion as a whole, for "Anglican tradition and order" have certainly not hitherto recognized or contemplated the ordination of any woman to the priesthood.<sup>2</sup>

The Committee then referred to the Preface to the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer, and to the 1930 Lambeth Conference Resolution 67 that "the Order of Deaconesses is for women the one and only Order of the ministry which we can recommend our branch of the Catholic Church to recognize and use". Neither the Committee nor the full Conference felt that in 1948 the time was ripe for further formal consideration of the question of the ordination of women, but twenty years later the matter was discussed at the Lambeth Conference in 1968.

The sub-committee on Women and the Priesthood (and, by implication, the Section on Ministry in which that report is placed) said "we find no conclusive reasons for withholding ordination to the priesthood from women as such", though it was recognized that cultural considerations, varying from one continent to another, might make the ordination of women easier in some countries than others. The Conference as a whole, however, found the theological arguments, for and against, inconclusive, but asked each church/province to study the question and report their findings to the Anglican Consultative Council.<sup>3</sup>

When the ACC first met in 1971, that study had only just begun and no church had reported, but the bishop of Hong Kong had asked for advice

<sup>1</sup> *Lambeth Conference 1948. Resolutions and Reports.* London: SPCK, 1948, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>3</sup> *Lambeth Conference 1968. Resolutions and Reports.* London: SPCK and New York: Seabury Press, 1968, pp. 39-40 and 106-108.

since his diocesan synod had approved in principle the ordination of women to the priesthood. (The Diocese of Hong Kong, has, since the Communists came to power in mainland China, been associated with the Council of the Church of South-East Asia: this is not an autonomous province and Hong Kong remains part of the Church of China. It is this unusual situation which has enabled it, to some extent, to take its own decisions.) The ACC in 1971 renewed the call to Anglican churches to express their views on ordination of women, and asked for reports by its meeting in 1973.

In reply to the Bishop of Hong Kong, the Council passed the following resolution:

In reply to the request of the Council of the Church of South-East Asia, this Council advises the Bishop of Hong Kong, acting with the approval of his synod, and any other bishop of the Anglican Communion acting with the approval of his province, that if he decides to ordain women to the priesthood, his action will be acceptable to this Council; and that this Council will use its good offices to encourage all provinces of the Anglican Communion to continue in communion with these dioceses (Resolution 28 b). (Limuru 1971) *Carried by 24 votes to 22.*

In passing it may be said that the phrase: "his action will be acceptable to this Council", and the reference to "good offices" has not passed without criticism as going beyond the consultative role of the Council. ACC also asked the Anglican metropolitans and primates to consult with other churches in their areas and report to the next meeting of the ACC.

The Limuru resolutions appear to have greatly stimulated study and reports began to arrive. The Report of the Dublin ACC meeting in 1973, however, said: "The Council notes a somewhat anomalous situation in which Churches report that they are waiting to see what consensus is developing in the Anglican Communion, or that they are waiting for further action by this Council meeting in Dublin. This deprives us of their contribution to the very consensus they seek, and tends to discourage further action by this Council. We repeat our assurance to the member churches, provinces, councils, and extra-provincial dioceses, that the decision on the ordination of women to the priesthood is theirs alone."

This time the Council adopted three *statements* as to the mind of the Council.

The Council agrees to recommend once more that, where any autonomous province of the Anglican Communion decides to ordain women to the priesthood, this should not cause any break in communion in our Anglican family.

Carried. In favour 50, against 2, abstentions 3.

The Council recognizes that any firm decision on the ordination of women to the priesthood will have important ecumenical repercussions, which need to be taken into account; but this consideration should not be decisive. The churches of the Anglican Communion must make their own decision.

Carried. In favour 54, against 1, abstentions nil.

The third statement again urged churches to send their views in time for the next meeting. (Dublin 1973.)

By the time of the Trinidad ACC meeting in 1976, decisions had begun to be made (see next section) and it had become clear that the Anglican Communion would present a considerable diversity of practice. The report has

this to say: "It is evident. . . that there is within Anglicanism an increasing acceptance of the principle that women may be ordained to the priesthood. . . The Anglican Communion faces an opportunity, as decisions about ordaining women to the priesthood give way to action and the number of women priests is increased. It is the opportunity to give witness to diversity without breaking the bonds of love which bind us in one communion." (Trinidad 1976).

We hope these details may give a characteristic picture of the way in which the Anglican Communion attempts to maintain its own unity and common purpose while respecting the autonomy and proper diversity of particular churches.

## II. The Present Position in the Anglican Communion

At the time of writing (April 1977) the situation is as follows:

### CHURCHES/PROVINCES WITH WOMEN PRIESTS

*The Diocese of Hong Kong:* First ordinations in November 1971, now has three women priests.

*The Anglican Church of Canada:* At the first ordination in November 1976, six women were ordained.

*The Episcopal Church of the United States of America:* Approval given at General Convention in September 1976, and the first ordinations under the new Canon took place in January 1977. The bishops also agreed procedures for regularizing the orders of the 15 women irregularly ordained in 1974-75.

### LEGISLATION AWAITING IMPLEMENTATION

*The Church of the Province of New Zealand* finally passed the bill for the ordination of women in May 1976 but a year must elapse before implementation: this decision is being challenged in the courts.

### CHURCHES/PROVINCES WHICH HAVE APPROVED IN PRINCIPLE

*The Province of Burma* "agrees to its introduction when circumstances so require it". (January 1972).

*The Church of England:* The General Synod "considers that there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood" and "invites the House of Bishops, when in the light of developments in the Anglican Communion generally as well as in this country, they judge the time for action to be right, to bring before the Synod a proposal to admit women to the priesthood". (July 1975).

*The Province of the Indian Ocean* "leaves it to each diocese to put this into practice". (November 1974).

*The Church of Ireland:* "The General Synod approved in principle, subject to the enactment of any necessary legislation." (May 1976).

*Japan Holy Catholic Church (Nippon Sei Ko Kai):* The bishops agreed that there is no fundamental objection from the aspect of biblical theology. But steps could not be taken until there was sufficient understanding at parochial/diocesan/provincial level. "While acknowledging the need for a

full exchange of opinion, we must guard against the danger of division and schism within the Anglican Communion arising from disagreement. In view of our relationship with other churches, the discussion should also proceed on the ecumenical plane." (1976).

*The Province of Kenya:* The House of Bishops in November 1976 "accepted in principle the ordination of women to the priesthood but felt the need for further discussion on Diocesan and Provincial levels." Meeting shortly afterwards, Standing Committee of Provincial Synod decided in favour and said: "If and when any woman is called by God to this office, the bishop will be open to put her through the normal process as all other candidates for training and ordination." But the province "would not rush women into ordination simply because other churches are doing the same". (1976).

*The Church in Wales:* The Governing Body decided that "there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood" but that "it would be inexpedient for the Church in Wales to take unilateral action in this matter at the present time". (April 1975).

*The Episcopal Church in Scotland* has taken no Synodical action but its Commission on Ministry in a report (1973) said: "It was agreed that while we can see no theological objection in principle to the ordination of women to the priesthood, we feel that this is not an appropriate time for our church to take independent action in this matter."

#### CHURCHES/PROVINCES WHERE ACTION IS PENDING

*The Church of England in Australia:* General Synod in May 1973 referred a report on this question by the Commission on Doctrine to the dioceses for study in preparation for a meeting of the General Synod in 1977.

*The Church of the Province of South Africa:* In November 1976 the debate and vote on ordination of women to the priesthood was deferred until the relevant report ("Patterns of Ministry") has been translated into some of the other languages used by the church. The matter would be proceeded with at Provincial Synod 1979.

*The Church of the Province of the West Indies:* Provincial Synod (February 1975) requested dioceses to educate themselves in importance and implications of the ordination of women, to include encouragement of informed discussion among laity, and the building up of the role of women and the creation of opportunities for leadership. Further action at next Provincial Synod.

#### CHURCHES/PROVINCES WHICH HAVE TAKEN NEGATIVE ACTION

*The Church of the Province of Central Africa:* Provincial Synod voted informally against taking steps to provide training for women for ordination to priesthood (1976).

*The Church of Ceylon:* A majority of the clergy of the dioceses of Colombo and Kurunagala have voted to take no action at present because the matter is not an issue of importance or urgency in Sri Lanka.

*Diocese of Singapore:* Synod voted against ordination of women to priesthood (December 1974).

*South Pacific Anglican Council:* The bishops deeply regretted the division in the Church caused by the ordination of women priests and resolved "that

we believe we cannot find in the Bible arguments for or against the admission of women to Holy Orders. Nevertheless we cannot recommend such a step to the church in our region at this time." (February 1977).

*Province of Tanzania:* Provincial Synod "is not ready to ordain women to be priests". (1976).

*The Church of the Province of West Africa:* Bishops have discussed issue since 1972 but as it "affects theological, cultural and sociological matters, we feel that it requires further careful study of the office and work of the priesthood so as to educate our people against the background of their own locality: until this is done, we do not consider the subject urgent". (1976).

### III. The Issues Which Face the Anglican Communion

#### WITHIN THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

Does the autonomy of an Anglican province permit it to take action on this matter without waiting for the agreement of the whole Anglican Communion? The passage quoted from the 1948 Lambeth Conference Committee takes the attitude that such action should not be taken by any province until after the fullest consideration by the Anglican Communion as a whole. Can the consideration which was given by the special committee at the 1968 Lambeth Conference, together with the substantial studies on the matter made in a large number of provinces and reviewed at the 1973 Dublin meeting of the ACC,<sup>4</sup> be regarded as that "fullest consideration"? On the evidence of all its meetings, the ACC has concluded that sufficient consideration had been given to enable Anglican provinces to make their own decisions and that this is a proper exercise of their autonomy. But as has already been noted, the 1973 Dublin ACC meeting observed a reluctance on the part of provinces to declare their mind; in some cases they were waiting for the ACC itself to make some decision.

In 1976 the Provincial Synod of Central Africa reaffirmed the request of their Episcopal Synod to the Anglican Church of Canada "not to act in the matter of the ordination of women to the priesthood, at least until the Lambeth Conference has given some clear lead to the churches". The bishops wanted to know whether there was a sufficient consensus in the Anglican Communion "to proceed with this grave, though possibly desirable, step". This request was presumably made in response to a resolution of the Canadian House of Bishops (October/November 1975) which asked the primate of the church to inform other Anglican primates of their intention to proceed to the ordination of women and to seek their response. If the responses were not overwhelmingly negative then the Canadian bishops would regard themselves as free to proceed from 1 November 1976. Since they did so proceed, it must be assumed that the response was not "overwhelmingly negative". The Lambeth Conference to which the Central African Synod referred will be held in 1978. By the time it meets there will be women priests in the Anglican churches/provinces in Canada and the USA as well as in Hong Kong and possibly also in New Zealand. Hence the next issue to arise will be to determine the

<sup>4</sup> *Partners in Mission*. Anglican Consultative Committee, Second meeting, Dublin 17-27 July 1973. London: SPCK, 1973, pp. 37-42.

relationship of churches/provinces which do ordain women to those that do not. It should be noted that, in the five years since the first ordination in Hong Kong, no Anglican church or province appears to have broken communion with that diocese and each of the three meetings of the ACC have expressed the hope that communion would not be broken with a church or province taking such action. Indeed, at the very same time that Synod of the Province of Central Africa voted against the ordination of women and appealed to the Canadian Church for delay, it also voted overwhelmingly "that it should remain in full communion with any other province which canonically ordains women to the priesthood".

It if may be reasonably assumed that, whatever its own misgivings, a province will not break communion with another which takes such a step, a practical question immediately arises. Will a church or province that does not ordain women allow a woman priest from another province to minister in its churches? The Central African Synod answered this question overwhelmingly in the negative. The Church of England bishops considered this question and reported that they "having enquired about the legal position of women ordained abroad who subsequently come to this country, have been advised that as the law stands neither the archbishop of the province nor the bishop of the diocese has any power to authorize a woman ordained abroad to officiate as a priest in the provinces of Canterbury and York". (Decisions and Recommendations of the House of Bishops 11 May 1976.) The South Pacific Anglican Council decided not to permit any visiting women priests to exercise priestly functions in the SPAC dioceses. (February 1977.)

#### RELATIONS WITH OTHER CHURCHES

A number of Anglican provinces have been engaged in conversations or in unity negotiations with churches that have women ministers. The Anglican Communion as a whole and a number of provinces in particular are engaged in conversations with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Anglicans have intercommunion agreements with the Old Catholic Churches. All of these relationships are influenced by, and influence, the current debate in the Anglican Communion: they can affect a province's decision whether to act, and, if it does so, its subsequent relationship to other churches. To this dialogue and debate with other churches we therefore now turn.

#### IV. The Ecumenical Dimension

In this section we consider discussions and correspondence on this issue between churches of the Anglican Communion on the one hand and the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Catholic and non-episcopal churches on the other. In the following section we consider how far the anticipation of ecumenical repercussions has, or has not, influenced the Anglican debate.

Answering a question in the General Synod in July 1976 about his communications with the leaders of other churches, the Archbishop of Canterbury said: "The question may well then be not so much 'should women be ordained' as to 'what should the relationship be between churches which do, and churches which do not ordain women'."

We have already noted (section I) the 1973 Dublin ACC statement recognizing that there would be ecumenical repercussions to any decision to ordain women but that, while these needed to be taken into account, this consideration should not be decisive. Behind this lies the 1968 Lambeth Conference request that the ACC initiate consultations with other churches which have women in their ordained ministry and with those which have not, and the 1971 Limuru ACC meeting request that metropolitans and primates of Anglican churches consult with other churches in their area. In 1975, when the Canadian primate wrote to his fellow Anglican primates, he also informed other Communion of the Canadian intention to ordain women.

The General Synod of the Church of England in July 1975 added to its resolutions already referred to, another on relationships with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

That this Synod, not wishing to prejudice improving relationships with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches by removing without consultation with them the legal and other barriers to the ordination of women in the Church of England, requests the Presidents to

- (1) inform the appropriate authorities in those churches of its belief that there are no fundamental objections to such ordination; and
- (2) invite those authorities to share in an urgent re-examination of the theological grounds for including women in the Order of Priesthood, with particular attention to the doctrine of Man and the doctrine of Creation.

The debate made several things clear: that the Old Catholic churches should also be consulted; that the motion should not be regarded as a delaying motion; and that correspondence had already begun with Cardinal Willebrands. In July 1976, the Archbishop of Canterbury communicated to the Synod his correspondence on this matter with the Pope, with Cardinal Willebrands and with the Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht, and his letter to the Oecumenical Patriarch. He also referred to consultations, formal and informal, with these churches.

#### DISCUSSIONS WITH ROMAN CATHOLICS

The published correspondence comprises two letters from the Archbishop to the Pope, and his two replies, and also an exchange of letters with Cardinal Willebrands (President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity). In his letter to Pope Paul, the Archbishop wrote "to inform Your Holiness of the slow but steady growth of a consensus of opinion within the Anglican Communion that there are no fundamental objections in principle to the ordination of women to the priesthood. At the same time we are aware that action on this matter could be an obstacle to further progress along the path of unity Christ wills for his Church." The Archbishop went on to express the hope that the common counsel desired both by the central authorities of the Anglican Communion and by the General Synod of the Church of England "may achieve a fulfilment of the Apostle's precept that 'speaking the truth in love' we 'may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ'." (July 1975).

In his answer Pope Paul wrote of the Catholic Church's position on this question:



She holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in only choosing men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church.

After referring to the Joint Commission between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church the Pope went on to say:

We must regretfully recognize that a new course taken by the Anglican Communion in admitting women to the ordained priesthood cannot fail to introduce into this dialogue an element of grave difficulty which those involved will have to take seriously into account. Obstacles do not destroy mutual commitment to a search for reconciliation (November 1975).

In February 1976 the Archbishop addressed another letter to the Pope:

The goal which we jointly seek is that visible unity of the Church for which Christ prayed. We believe this unity will be manifested within a diversity of legitimate traditions because the Holy Spirit has never ceased to be active within the local churches throughout the world. Sometimes what seems to one tradition to be a genuine expression of such a diversity in unity will appear to another tradition to go beyond the bounds of legitimacy. Discussion within the Anglican Communion concerning the possibility of the ordination of women is at present just such an issue.

In his reply, Pope Paul wrote of "the likelihood, already very strong in some places, that the Anglican churches will proceed to admit women to the ordained priesthood". Because of his affection for the Anglican Communion and his hope that "the Holy Spirit... would lead us along the path of reconciliation", he expressed "the sadness with which we encounter so grave a new obstacle and threat on that path". (March 1976).

Although the Archbishop had originally written as a result of the resolution of the Church of England General Synod he was acting (as he mentioned in a letter to Cardinal Willebrands) both as Primate of All England and as President of the Lambeth Conference. It would seem that Pope Paul's replies were addressed to him mainly in the second capacity and the increasing anxiety of the second letter may have had particularly in mind the decision on this matter already then taken by the Anglican Church in Canada and awaited from the Episcopal Church in the USA in September 1976.

On 15 October 1976, Pope Paul approved a Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to Ministerial Priesthood prepared by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This Declaration, together with an official commentary, was published on 27 January 1977. It is intended as an explanation of the statement that "the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination". It is, in the main, an expanded exposition of the reasons given by the Pope in his letter to the Archbishop and speaks of the constant tradition, the attitude of Christ, the practice of the apostles as well as of the permanent value of this attitude and practice.

The Declaration was, presumably, in the first place intended for the Roman Catholic Church itself and particularly perhaps for those parts of the church (e.g., in the USA) where the possibility of the ordination of women is a lively

issue. It is however clear from the official commentary that it also had an ecumenical intention, particularly towards the Anglican Communion. After referring to the action of the Church of Sweden and of the Reformed Churches, it comments:

In reality, the admission of women to the pastoral office seemed to raise no strictly theological problem, in that these communities had rejected the sacrament of Order at the time of their separation from the Roman church. But a new and much more serious situation was created when ordinations of women were carried out within communities that considered that they preserved the apostolic succession of order.

The commentary then refers to the Hong Kong ordinations, the Philadelphia ordinations in 1974 (subsequently declared invalid), the intention of the Canadian Church, and the approval given in principle by the Church of England's General Synod. In a later section on pluralism, the commentary speaks of attempts being made, especially in Anglican circles, to broaden the debate.

Is the Church perhaps bound to Scripture and tradition as an absolute, when the Church is a people making its pilgrim way and should listen to what the Spirit is saying? Or else a distinction is made between essential points on which unanimity is needed and questions of discipline admitting of diversity: and if the conclusion reached is that the ordination of women belongs to these secondary matters, it would not harm progress towards the union of the churches. Here again it is the church that decides by her practice and Magisterium what requires unanimity, and distinguishes it from acceptable or desirable pluralism. The question of the ordination of women impinges too directly on the nature of the ministerial priesthood for one to agree that it should be resolved within the framework of legitimate pluralism between churches. That is the whole meaning of the letter of Pope Paul VI to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In passing, the commentary refers to certain hesitations on the part of both medieval and modern theologians in expressing an absolute exclusion of women from ordination for this reason; in the past there were deaconesses: had they received true sacramental ordination? The Sacred Congregation of the Faith preferred not to treat this matter in the Declaration but to keep it for future study. Perhaps an Anglican may properly recall the many attempts in the last half century of both Lambeth Conferences and Anglican Synods to contain all the ministerial vocations of women within the Deaconess Order. These cannot be said to have succeeded in providing fulfilment for all such vocations, and appear at times to have hindered the development of the Deaconess Order itself.

The best reported discussions at a more local level are those that have taken place in the USA. This reflects the fact that a decision on this matter was known to be before the 1976 General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

The Anglican/Roman Catholic Consultation in the USA (ARC) had been in progress since 1965. In October 1975, setting aside its previous agenda, ARC devoted its meeting entirely to the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate. In preparation for this meeting, a special consultation of ten Roman Catholics and ten Episcopalians was convened in June 1975 on the initiative of the Episcopalians. The two chairmen only

were members of ARC, the rest being specialists. The members of this consultation subsequently prepared papers for the ARC meeting.<sup>5</sup>

The members of the consultation considered together the bearing of scripture, tradition, theological reflection and the roles of men and women in Church and society. The question was not what Roman Catholics would be likely to decide about their internal practice, but what Episcopalians should consider in arriving at a decision for their own church life. The Roman Catholics were especially anxious not to be seen as intending to exert pressure on the constitutional process of the Episcopal church. The whole group agreed a statement on the bearing of tradition upon the subject (including those Episcopalians in favour of the ordination and those against) of which the final paragraph reads:

The theological exploration mentioned above has been undertaken by both Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians. Official pronouncements give no indication of any expectation of change in the present position of the Roman Catholic Church on this issue in the immediate future. At this meeting, a number of the Roman Catholic participants felt that the implications of this matter had not been explored sufficiently to offer a final decision. On the other hand, the question of the ordination of women is expected to be proposed for action at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 1976. Anglican participants felt that discussion in the Episcopal Church in the United States had reached a stage where decision was becoming possible.

The statement of the 1975 meeting of ARC, noting that the Episcopal church would consider the question in September 1976 and that the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church had recently reaffirmed its position that only men are to be ordained to the priesthood, went on to say:

If a divergence on this subject eventuates in official action, it will introduce an important new element into officially appointed dialogues, as well as into conversations and covenants at many other levels. However, the members of ARC are convinced that this difference would not lead to ARC's termination or to the abandonment of its declared goal.

ARC's contribution is not to propose what either church should do, but to place the question within the context of agreed statements already issued by ARC and ARCIC ... notably the ... agreed statements on Eucharistic Doctrine ... and on Ministry and Ordination.

Under the heading "Diversity in Unity", the statement said: "A difference in practice between our churches on ordination of women would inevitably raise the question of its effect upon the goal of full communion and organic unity. If this goal is thought of as requiring uniformity in doctrine and discipline concerning candidates for ordination, the problem would indeed be a serious one... The ecumenical task is to inquire whether one church can fully recognize another in the midst of differences."

The reference in the 1975 ARC statement to the "leadership of the Roman Catholic Church" is presumably to a statement in 1975 by Archbishop Bernardin of Cincinnati, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in which he restated "the Church's teaching that women are not to be ordained to the priesthood". He quoted a report to the NCCB on this issue:

<sup>5</sup> These papers, together with the ARC report are published under the title *Pro and Con on Ordination of Women*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976.

The constant tradition and practice of the Catholic Church against the ordination of women, interpreted (whenever interpreted) as of divine law, is of such a nature as to constitute a clear teaching of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church. Though not formally defined, this is Catholic doctrine. . .

(This reason) is of ponderous theological import. Its force will not be appreciated by those who look for Revelation and theology in Scripture alone, and who do not appreciate Tradition as a source of theology.

Because of (this reason) a negative answer to the possible ordination of women is indicated. The well-founded present discipline will continue to have and to hold the entire field unless and until a contrary theological development takes place, leading ultimately to a clarifying statement from the Magisterium.

This statement, like the more recent Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was apparently directed in the first instance to Roman Catholics: "honesty and concern for the Catholic community, including those of its members who advocate the ordination of women, also require that church leaders do not seem to encourage unreasonable hopes and expectations, even by their silence". (It cannot be said that in this the Archbishop has been entirely successful: a considerable number of American Roman Catholic women including a sizeable number of nuns, and supported by priests, continue to press for the admission of women to priesthood). But the statement was no doubt also intended to leave Episcopalians in no doubt of the *official* attitude of the Roman Catholic Church.

According to two Episcopal bishops who had visited him in Rome, Cardinal Willebrands is reported as saying that a decision by the Episcopal Church to allow women priests would not end the Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue, but it would "create a new element of tension to the present consultation and will have the effect of increasing the tendency towards separation". The Cardinal does not apparently regard the matter as simply a disciplinary one but a question to be discussed at the theological level and related to apostolic tradition.

There is no published evidence that the ordination of women has been discussed by ARCIC (the international commission) and *Confessions in Dialogue* (1975 edition published before the ARC discussions were available) notes that "The Roman Catholic/Presbyterian-Reformed consultation in the United States is thus far the only one to undertake a serious study of the role of women in Church and society, including the *ordination of women*".<sup>6</sup> Professor J. Robert Wright, an Episcopalian member of ARC, has asked whether, since the ARCIC agreed statement on ministry and ordination has said that "what we have to say represents the consensus of the Commission on essential matters where it considers that doctrine admits no divergence", the absence from the statement of any reference to the ordination of women suggests that, for the Commission itself, it was *not* an essential doctrinal matter.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> NILS EHRENSTRÖM: *Confessions in Dialogue*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1975, p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> J. R. WRIGHT: "Women Priests: Continued Dialogue", *The Ecumenist*, September-October 1976, pp. 92-96.

## DISCUSSIONS WITH THE ORTHODOX

In July 1975 the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote to the Oecumenical Patriarch making substantially the same points as in his letter to the Pope. Though no direct reply was received, the Holy Synod instructed Archbishop Athenagoras of Thyateira and Great Britain to call on the Archbishop of Canterbury and make clear the Holy Synod's view which it felt was identical with that of Archbishop Athenagoras, who had declared his official position in a letter to his clergy in May 1975 and which he reiterated in a letter to the *Orthodox Herald* May/June 1976. Archbishop Iakovos of North and South America issued a strong statement in January 1977. Both archbishops have welcomed the various Vatican statements: both attribute the demand for the ordination of women to secular influences: . . . "contemporary fashion which overthrows the evangelical order and the experience of the Church" (Athenagoras); "a deeply divided and secular-minded and oriented Church, as it seems to have recently become" (Iakovos).

At the international level, the Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions, meeting in Moscow in July-August 1976, after noting a number of agreements, said: "there are still many differences to be reconciled and many divergent points of view to be overcome before further substantial progress can be made. Among these difficulties clearly the subject of the ordination of women will figure prominently." Concerning this question, a resolution was passed:

The Orthodox members of the Commission wish to state that if the Anglican churches proceed to the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate, this will create a very serious obstacle to the development of our relations in the future. Although the Anglican members are divided among themselves on the theological principle involved, they recognize the strength of Orthodox convictions on this matter and undertake to make this known to their churches.

It would appear, however, that the theological issues of the ordination of women were not discussed in any detail: the Orthodox resolution was aimed at the Anglican world in general.<sup>8</sup>

Once again, the major local discussions have taken place in the USA: the possibility of Episcopalian women priests has been a matter of concern to Orthodox ecumenists in the USA for several years (e.g., Father John Meyendorff, formerly chairman of the WCC Faith and Order Commission). In November 1975, the All-American Council of the Orthodox Church in America addressed a message to the Anglican Communion, in which the earlier trend towards unity was contrasted with the "counter-trend which has saddened our hearts". "It is with pain in our hearts that we recognize your increasing departure from Ecclesiastical Tradition and Apostolic Faith, a fact confirmed by the many letters and inquiries that we have received from Anglican priests and laymen." The crisis in the Episcopal Church is said not to be limited to the issue of the ordination of women.

The Anglican-Orthodox Theological Consultation (USA) met in January 1976 "to study together how the proposed admission of women to the priesthood and episcopate of the Episcopal Church would affect our present rela-

trouship and our further progress towards good will and unity". The joint statement, after listing the matters considered, contained both Orthodox and Anglican statements. After setting out their reasons against the ordination of women, the Orthodox concluded with this comment:

Our discussions concerning the ordination of women have disclosed basic differences between Orthodox and Anglicans in the understanding of Scripture and Tradition and their significance for the Church. It is evident that if the Anglican Communion takes the decisive action of admitting women to the priesthood and the episcopate the issue will involve not only a point of church discipline, but the basis of the Christian faith as expressed in the Church's ministries. It will obviously have a decisively negative effect on the issue of the recognition of Anglican Orders and on the future of Anglican-Orthodox dialogue in general and will call for a major reassessment of the quality and goals of dialogue between the two bodies.

After the decision of General Convention in favour of the ordination of women, the plans for the Anglican-Orthodox, Theological Consultation were changed, each group meeting separately to assess relationships in the light of the decision. In a letter to Orthodox members of the Consultation, Father Schneirla (Orthodox Consultation Co-Secretary) said "this unilateral action of some parts of the Anglican Communion, contravening the testimony of Scripture and the unbroken tradition of the Catholic Church, has radically changed the Anglican image — it may comfort members of Reformation tradition also in consultation with Anglicans". He saw the need for careful reassessment of "our formal relations with Anglicans here. While we do not make decisions for the Anglicans we must make some for ourselves".

The Anglican members of the Theological Consultation met in order to assess the implication of the General Convention's decision for Anglican-Orthodox relations in America and to make proposals for the course of future dialogue. In a message to the Orthodox members they said: "It is our considered opinion that this action of the Episcopal Church does not create a new ground of division. Rather it is an expression of more fundamental differences which lie at the root of our long-sustained and unhappy separation." It presents an opportunity to probe more deeply the fundamental causes of our division.

#### DISCUSSIONS WITH THE OLD CATHOLICS

The Old Catholic Churches stand in a different relationship to Anglican Churches than do the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, since there is full communion between Anglicans and Old Catholics. The basic document, the Bonn Agreement of July 1931, declares (*inter alia*) that: "Intercommunion does not require from either Communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all essentials of the Christian Faith." It is no doubt with this in mind that the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his letter to Archbishop Kok of Utrecht (July 1975) said: "The relationship of full communion which exists between our churches is one which points to a unity in diversity which would appear to be the way in which the longed for unity of Christ's flock could best be envisaged and hoped for."

In his answer, Archbishop Kok referred to a statement of the 1975 International Bishops Conference: following Scripture and Tradition, "only men and not women can be bearers of this priesthood of Christ, because Jesus Christ was a man and delegated His work of Redemption to his apostles who were also men. The question of ordination touches the fundamental structure of the Church. . . . No church can alone take the decision in this question, only the Church as a whole, the *ecclesia universalis* is called for that." The Archbishop expressed the hope that this issue would not bring division between "our churches".

In September 1976, the International Bishops Conference reiterated these views with one contrary vote. They concluded:

The churches which have preserved continuity with the ancient undivided Church and its sacramental ministerial order, should jointly discuss this question of sacramental ordination of women, being fully aware of eventual consequences resulting from unilateral decisions.

Since the Episcopal Church in the USA and the Polish National Catholic Church (one of the Old Catholic Churches) practice intercommunion, their joint Intercommunion Commission considered the matter in April and October 1976. It was hoped that the Old Catholics would support the objectives of the agreement on intercommunion while disagreeing with any decision on the part of the Episcopal Church to ordain women and not permitting any women so ordained to function in any sacramental acts involving Old Catholic members or priests, and recognizing that no further work of the Commission could be done until the Polish National Catholic Church determined its response to the actions of Anglican Churches. However, Prime Bishop Zielinski announced that "The relationship of sacramental intercommunion between our two churches is terminated until a determination is made by one General Synod." (The Synod meets in 1978.)

At a meeting on this issue in Assisi in 1975 of the Anglican-Roman Catholic group for (continental) West Europe (in which Old Catholics also participated), Father Nickel described the dilemma of Old Catholics faced with an Anglican church which ordained women.

Our close association and innumerable joint meetings would inevitably entail the introduction of women clergy into our own church. The problem may be summed up in our case as placing before us the following alternative: (i) either it is a matter of substance requiring us to give notice to bring intercommunion to an end; (ii) or else it is purely a matter of procedure, in which case we should expedite the ordination of women into our own Church.

He pleaded for a Commission composed of Anglicans, Old Catholics, Orthodox and Roman Catholics to undertake a thorough investigation of the theological aspects of this question. "No Catholic Church should make a unilateral attempt to introduce the ordination of women as priests and bishops in the absence of substantial agreement between the denominations."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> P. STAPLES: *The Assisi Report*. Inter-University Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research, 1975.

## DISCUSSIONS WITH OTHER CHURCHES

In considering ecumenical repercussions, the published evidence would suggest that Anglicans have been almost wholly concerned with the effect of ordaining Anglican women on relationships with Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Old Catholics, and have almost entirely ignored the effect that any decision to ordain, or not to ordain, would have on relationships with other churches. That there are such consequences is recognized by the Episcopal Church in the USA. They met with representatives of their partner churches in the Consultation on Church Union to consider insights from women in sacramental ministry. In their report to ECUSA General Convention, the Joint Committee on Ecumenical Relations summed up the possible ecumenical impact of the proposed ordination of women:

In Orthodox relations, ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate would clearly be an additional obstacle to unity efforts. Although contacts and conversations would not terminate, there might well be need for a reassessment in the goals of dialogue. In Anglican-Roman Catholic relations it is evident that Roman Catholic opinion can be found on both sides of the question, although Roman Catholic practice is not likely to change quickly. Should the Episcopal Church authorize the ordination of women, this difference in ordination practice would necessarily be a subject for discussion and interpretation... In relation with non-Episcopal churches, our failure to admit women to these orders is at present an obstacle to unity.

Unity conversations raise this question in various ways: local arrangements for joint ministry or for the formation of ecumenical parishes (e.g., in New Zealand and England) raise the question of the recognition of any women ministers who may be involved.

The Ten Propositions for Christian Unity of the Churches' Unity Commission in England call for mutual recognition of ministry: since all non-episcopal churches in England ordain women this would mean, for Anglicans recognizing women ministers in the Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches (though an individual might claim "the rights of conscience" promised in the Propositions).

So far this question has played a relatively small part in the debate on recognition of non-episcopal ministries. (Ironically, the Anglican Church in Canada withdrew from unity negotiations with churches that ordain women at the very time when it was itself deciding to do so.) On the other hand, when the Church of Sweden ordained women in 1961, the relationship between it and the Church of England was altered in one significant point: Church of England bishops ceased to take part in the consecration of Swedish bishops. However, in Autumn 1976, an English bishop took part in the consecration of the Bishop of Karlstad, which may suggest a change of position.

At the time of the Anglican-Methodist Unity conversations in England many fervently hoped that the Methodist Church would *not* accept women for ordination until the unity question was settled. In the event, the first ordinations took place in 1974, after the Church of England had twice failed to get a large enough vote for the scheme, but it does not appear that this issue was a significant factor. Nevertheless, the report in 1968 of a Joint Commission which considered what would happen if the Methodist Church



did, and the Church of England did not, ordain women is significant and worth summarizing.

The Commission postulated that the reunion of the two churches might have reached stage one (Reconciliation of Ministries and Consecration of Methodist bishops) when the Methodist Church ordained women ministers while the Church of England did not. It seemed to the Commission that:

- (i) neither church should criticize or condemn the other for the action it believed right to take;
- (ii) unilateral action must introduce an irritant into the process of growing together;
- (iii) but unilateral action should not constitute an insurmountable problem to stage one of the union "provided satisfactory means of accommodation can be devised";
- (iv) one such way would be to agree that women Methodist ministers would not perform in the Church of England those acts reserved, in Anglican practice, for the priesthood (e.g., celebration of Holy Communion, laying on of hands at ordination, pronouncing absolution, and the blessing);
- (v) however, if when stage two was reached (full union) the Church of England showed no likelihood of ordaining women, the full consequences of unilateral action would become apparent and might hinder implementation of stage two.

The Commission thought that difficulties at parochial level might be eased by some sort of conscience clause but foresaw difficulties in connection with their participation in ordinations, and also concerning women and the episcopate. They trusted, however, that the formidable difficulties arising from different practices would be overcome.

It should be noted that these "other churches" are not necessarily non-episcopal: in addition to the Church of Sweden, the Church of South India is an episcopal church whose episcopally ordained clergy minister in Anglican Churches: its Synod in January 1976 declared that men and women are equally eligible for the ordained ministry: the decision must be ratified by two-thirds of diocesan councils.

#### V. The Use Made of Ecumenical Evidence

How far, and in what ways, has ecumenical discussion influenced the Anglican debate? This is very difficult to estimate but it may be illustrated from within the Church of England.

The use among Anglicans of many of the same arguments against ordination of women as appear in Roman Catholic and Orthodox statements (e.g., the witness of Scripture and the Tradition of the Church, Christ as male chose only male apostles, the nature of ministerial priesthood, the priest acting *in persona Christi*) does not necessarily imply direct influence. People who hold such views do so, in the first instance, because they believe them to be true, though the fact that they are *also* held by other episcopal churches with a very large membership is felt to be a support to these convictions.

(It may be noted that arguments drawn from the position of Mary, especially by Orthodox, and the particular way in which the authority of the Church's Magisterium is set out in Roman Catholic statements, are not so likely to find a place in Anglican argument.)

Others, while not wholly opposed, see no arguments in favour, and are reinforced in their view (that no change should be made in the traditional discipline) by official Roman Catholic and Orthodox positions. They might, however, regard a change in, for example, Roman Catholic teaching and practice as a sign that such ordination would be proper for Anglicans also.

On the other hand, it might be expected that those Anglicans who most readily accept non-episcopal ministries would also accept the ordination of women. This is not always so: some Anglican Evangelicals, while recognizing non-episcopal ministries, have real difficulty in agreeing to ordination of women because of their understanding of Scripture, particularly on the question of authority.

Perhaps the Anglicans on whom the ecumenical debate may be assumed to have had most influence are those who, while accepting the principle of the ordination of women, are against any action for the present, not wishing to disturb recent growth in fellowship with Roman Catholics nor to dash hopes that Rome, and perhaps the Orthodox, might soon recognize Anglican orders. It is of course natural that those who hope for reconciliation with a particular church will hope that nothing is done to hinder unity (such indeed was the feeling of many Anglicans and Methodists over this issue during their unity-conversations); but certain questions do arise: how far are Anglican expectations, for example, over Orthodox recognition, too sanguine and liable to ignore other real difficulties over ministry etc.? How far do some Roman Catholic statements tend to ignore the variety of views on priesthood found within Anglicanism and assume a greater identity of understanding than necessarily obtains between the two Churches?

Reference should perhaps be made to a tendency both among those who are opposed and those who are indifferent to dismiss the question as peripheral: why, it is asked, upset relations with the Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Old Catholics for a small (and, by implication, unimportant) minority? Summary dismissal of any possibility of a woman having a vocation to priesthood is one of the reasons for the deep sense of injustice felt by many women. When many commentators (rightly) protest that no one has a "right to ordination", they would do well to recognize that what they may be ignoring is the claim that a woman, like a man, has a "right" to have her sense of vocation tested by the Church. This, like the question of truth itself, is surely too serious to be dismissed as peripheral.

Not infrequently, the suggestion is made that only a General Council could change so important a part of the tradition and that none ought to act before it has taken place. On this Bishop Vogel of West Missouri comments:

It is wistful, to say the least, to project an ecumenical council truly representative of Christendom in the near future . . . where General Councils cannot be called, decisions must be made beneath that conciliar level, although they should always be made on the broadest consensus possible. The ecumenical consequences of

an act by a church must be seriously taken into account . . . but . . . truth — not the consequences of choosing the truth — must be the ultimate criterion in decision making.<sup>10</sup>

In seeking that consensus, Anglicans seem to have conducted their ecumenical debate largely by way of bilateral dialogues. Some individual Anglicans have been involved in Faith and Order and other WCC discussions of this matter but there appear to have been no occasions when Anglicans have deliberately sought a multilateral debate, bringing together Roman Catholics, Orthodox and members of non-episcopal churches, with Anglicans to take common counsel on this matter; this could surely be done without requiring only common decisions.

#### VI. Some Comments and Conclusions

The Anglican Communion has claimed to have regard for ecumenical debate, yet, some will no doubt accuse its provinces of simply making their own decisions, ignoring the views of their partners in dialogue. It may be, that in some quarters, for example, in the USA, unrealistic expectations of imminent change in Roman Catholic practice are entertained. Perhaps, however, the best way of understanding the situation is to look once again at how the Anglican Communion is trying to resolve its internal debate and ask whether it has anything to say about its relations with other churches and communions.

The issues which have surfaced in the inter-Anglican debate on this question are:

- is it right to ordain women?
- may each church act autonomously?
- how great a pluriformity is consonant with being members of one communion?

They are being answered in some such way as this: though we differ on whether it is right or expedient to ordain women, since an increasing number of provinces believe that it is right, and believe that they can, and should, act on their own, we have to resolve the question of our relationship to each other. However great the internal strain, within a province or between provinces, we believe that we should refuse to break communion.

This would seem to be a characteristically Anglican way of doing things. (Cf.: Article 34 of the Traditions of the Church: "It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like . . . Every particular or national church hath authority to ordain, change and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.") (A somewhat caustic comment from Father Schneirla may be quoted: "The Anglican genius for comprehensiveness will, if worst comes to worst, confect a formula comfortable enough for clergy of all sexes. The Anglican Communion began as a working ecumenical movement and English insular necessity has proven to be time-worthy and exportable.")

However, another Orthodox consulted during the preparation of the consultative document for the Church of England said that though the Church of England should listen to what other churches have to say, to find out what they are witnessing to, it should not spend its time calculating its moves on what others will do. What matters is what is right, what is doctrine, not what is expedient, and he himself found no theological impediment.<sup>11</sup>

The question that the Anglican Communion now poses to its partners in dialogue, therefore, is whether such a *modus vivendi* as obtains between Anglican provinces would also be possible between Communions.

A significant comment on ecumenical relationships has been made by the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, Archbishop Scott:

There is rightfully real concern within our church about the impact of our action on ecumenical relationships, particularly with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. This concern is shared by people in favour and those opposed to the ordination of women to the priesthood. There is general recognition that it will constitute another obstacle in achieving closer relationships but it is also believed that it will not cause a severing of relationships.

The Archbishop went on to suggest that the Canadian action might have "a creative impact upon relationships". From a historical perspective it seemed that ecumenical conferences and Vatican Councils did not initiate completely new courses of action in the Church but confirmed some beliefs and practices which were underway and rejected others. In the early Church, difficult and slow communications led to thinking developing, and action being taken, in isolation.

In our world of rapid communication, we think more in terms of the possibility of achieving a universal consensus. This means that we should be seeking to make universal judgements about possible courses of action before they had been tried or tested in some particular context. I wonder, "Is this how developments can or should take place?" I wonder, too, given the realities of today's world, if waiting for a universal consensus does not mean ruling out any action. In the early Church many things were tried in one area and then either approved or rejected for Catholic use. Perhaps, today, we need again to consider this as a valid way of acting.

The Archbishop recognized that the step that the Canadian Church was taking was controversial but it was not taken lightly. The majority of Synod members believed that it was a step that should be taken and was a response to God's call.

If we are prepared to act but also to recognize that our action must be tested by experience and if we are prepared to have other churches help us to evaluate the results of the action, then we may, in fact, be making a contribution to wider ecumenical relationships. We may be helping the whole Church reflect at a deeper level. Whether our action turns out this way or not will depend in part on the attitude with which we move ahead. If we move ahead arrogantly, implying that those who disagree with our action are wrong, the action will not help ecumenical relationships. If we move ahead with conviction, but with humility and with a willingness to have the results of our action carefully evaluated, then a real contribution to ecumenical relationships may well result. I hope that it is in this spirit that we are preparing to move.

<sup>11</sup> *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*. A consultative document presented by the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry. London, 1972, p. 68.