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A/RCCOW 4

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND ANGLICAN/ROMAN CATHOLIC  
RELATIONS

I agreed reluctantly to present for this meeting a paper with very modest aims - certainly not the aim of even suggesting an answer to the question formulated at the Informal Talks in Rome, which is the question we are charged to address ourselves to; rather that of surveying the ground, very much as Miss Howard has done but from a Roman Catholic point of view and restricting myself rather more - in fact to the period since the Limuru meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in 1971. In fact my only qualification to present anything here is that I attended the Lambeth Conference of 1968 and the three subsequent meetings of the A.C.C. and have followed developments on our question with the concern proper to one who is charged, within the S.P.C.U. with working to promote Anglican/Roman Catholic unity.

In this connection I have to say that I have tried over that period to impress on the Secretariat the importance of the issue, and on two occasions presented fairly full written reports to full staff meetings, with requests for some policy directives; but in spite of this, as will be seen from the sequence of events described by Miss Howard and below by myself, the Secretariat was somewhat tardy in rousing itself to the gravity of the matter and partly perhaps as a result of this, had very little impact on the Declaration of 1977 which has been the most momentous Catholic step.

Casting about in my mind as to how to make this paper most useful, I came to the conclusion that, in view of the concise and judicious quality of Miss Howard's paper, I could do worse than use it as a framework for my own comments, perhaps filling it out here and there from a Roman Catholic standpoint and of course taking account of other material with which no doubt all of us are acquainted.



The first sentence of Miss Howard's paper ( which I will hereafter refer to for brevity's sake as H with the page number)

"The Anglican Communion is made up of autonomous Churches and provinces which are in full communion with one another"

already sharpens, in our context, a question which has long seemed to me insufficiently regarded, namely, how far is a search for unity between the Church of Rome and the Anglican Communion as a whole, considered in practice, realistic and appropriate? ARCIC of course with its rigorous concentration on the historic doctrinal issues, has often seemed to some to ignore this and in its search for agreed statements to expound a Platonic Anglicanism which is not exactly identifiable anywhere. I shall refer to this problem later.

The ACC at Limuru was clearly conscious of this problem within the Communion in connection with the ordination of women, doing its best to ensure in advance that action in the matter should not be divisive, and in its eagerness seeming perhaps to go beyond its powers (cf. H.236)

By Dublin the ACC management had clearly become conscious of this criticism, but on the other hand the lobby in favour of the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood had become much stronger and was also rather touchy by reason of the presence of Canon du Bois and some of his followers; thus the paragraph in the report in which the Council notes a somewhat anomalous situation is itself a somewhat anomalous paragraph. It reproaches those who are waiting to see whether a consensus is developing - or for further action by the Council... "thus depriving us of their contribution and tending to discourage further action by the Council (1) Two things struck one here, first that the consensus talked about here was by now clearly assumed to be a consensus in favour, reflecting the now overwhelming majority opinion in the ACC; second, what further action could the ACC legitimately and appropriately take, beyond registering the facts?



The third part of the Limuru resolution, much less well-known than the first two, recommended the Anglican Churches to 'consult' with other Churches in their area; presumably this referred to non-Anglican churches; if so, the only evidence I have come across of its being seriously acted on is the U.S. ARC discussion of October 1975. (There may of course have been various reasons for this and the responsibility may not always have been Anglican).

A complaint often voiced by Catholics and by Anglican opponents of OWP is that this consultation should surely have been an integral part of that 'fullest consultation' called for at Lambeth 1948, which Dublin ACC asserts rather than demonstrates and which H 239 questions. Even apart from this question of ecumenical consultation, there was much difference of opinion at Dublin, ranging from one exuberant lady who said the theology had 'been argued ad nauseam -now let's get on with it!' to the consultant learned in sexual psychology who said that the issues he thought decisive had hardly had their surface scraped.(2)

As a mere observer, I cannot remember anything in the Dublin debate which suggested that the delegates had plumbed the matter to the depths, and the bishop of Chichester's reference, in his speech ~~at~~ the Church of England synod (3rd July 1975) to Dublin, where he was a consultant, suggests he retains the same memory. One of the three statements emanating from Dublin (H236) does show that the Council was conscious of the need to say something in recognition of the ecumenical dimension, but its form raises certain logical problems. (3)

If a Church 'makes its own decision' after having 'taken into account' the 'important ecumenical repercussions' (and consultation would be necessary even to find out what exactly they were before taking them into account) this is a logical order of things. It is arguable that this is what

happened in U.S.A., though the question remains how far the US/ARC statement, admirable and open-minded as it is, gives a realistic account of the likely ecumenical repercussions (see below). But I am not sure that it makes sense to set up an antithesis between a Church 'making its own decision' and making ecumenical considerations decisive. A Church might make a completely mature and independent decision that ecumenical considerations were important enough at least to postpone *practical* decisions, which would not be the same thing at all as submitting to outside pressures.

But if a church makes a decision so difficult to go back on as this without previous ecumenical consultation I am not clear how ecumenical repercussions can be said to have been taken into account at all. Perhaps this is no more than a criticism of the drafting of the Dublin statement, but my recollection does suggest that this loose drafting reflects the fact that the statement was hardly more than a sop to those who had vainly pressed the 'ecumenical' argument.

The resolution adopted by the General Synod of the Church of England in July 1975 (H 241 and A/RCCOM 1) seems to me to be more logical and to reveal more concern for the 'ecumenical repercussions', though very various degrees of this concern showed themselves in the debate (to which I shall return). This is not unimportant since I believe that even at this stage of history the policy of the Church of England has more resonance in the Anglican Communion than is everywhere recognised.

I am not very sure what is meant in H 241 by saying that the debate made it clear 'that the motion should not be regarded as a delaying motion'. If this means 'should not be regarded simply as a stalling tactic', all well and good. Or are we back with the confusion of Dublin - with a statement of the order of "we have just X weeks to discuss this, after that we shall be going ahead anyway"? Statement 2 seems to intend that there should be no unilateral action until after ecumenical



consultation. But there was some rather loaded language in the synod about ecumenical scruples.

'no progress at all could be made if "everyone looks over his shoulder to see what his neighbour is going to do"  
(Bishop of Oxford)

' delay would lead to an "After you, Claude" situation till the end of time' (Bishop of Winchester)

However that may be the debate revealed for the first time that high-level discussions had opened with Rome. The Bishop of Chelmsford read a letter addressed by Cardinal Willebrands to Archbishop Coggan (the normal practice of the S.P.C.U. is to address him in his capacity as president of the Anglican Communion) which revealed that at last the question was beginning to arouse interest in Rome and adding

"It cannot be said that these on-going studies point to any prospect of change in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to ordination, yet they raise points on which useful exchanges of ideas could take place.....  
Our recent experience in dialogue has confirmed in the perspective of history the wisdom of taking common counsel on matters potentially divisive while they are still within our control." (4)

The archbishop acted promptly enough on the Synod's recommendation, addressing the first of his letters to Paul VI less than a week later (July 9th). There is a sentence in this letter which is not entirely clear: "The central authorities of the Anglican Communion have therefore called for common counsel in this matter, as has the General Synod of the Church of England". Who are referred to as central authorities? the General Synods? The metropolitans? If so, how many? In any case, a glance at A/RCCOW 1 will show that this call for common counsel was now relevant in rather varying degrees. In some cases it looked like calling for locking the stable door after the horse had bolted.

Before the Pope replied, November 30th 1975, there was modest common counsel in the shape of the first of the informal talks organised by Bishop Howe with the Secretariat (to which talks the Pope referred approvingly in his reply). There was neither preparation nor time for much discussion in the terms of No.2 of the English resolution of the previous July, but what emerged was the proposal which has become our terms of reference.

In his second letter to the Pope, dated February 10th 1976 and formally delivered personally by Bishop Howe in an audience, the Archbishop began by mentioning the imminence of the tenth anniversary of Archbishop Ramsey's visit to Rome. He identified himself strongly with the commitments then made, but also raised the question whether the issue of the ordination of women was one of 'legitimate diversity' or not. He finally looked forward to the day when he might meet the Pope.

The Pope's first reaction to this letter came in the conversation during the audience at which it was delivered. This is clear from the Pope's later written reply (March 23rd). In this the Pope expressed still more feelingly his sadness at "so grave a new obstacle and threat" but did not modify his earlier assertion that 'obstacles do not destroy mutual commitment to a search for reconciliation' - indeed, he said more eloquently that "it is no part of corresponding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to fail in the virtue of hope". He made no allusion to the question about 'legitimate diversity' raised by the Archbishop.

It is I think very important to see the famous Declaration approved in October 1976 and published in January 1977, against the background of this correspondence. Obviously the Declaration was already at an advanced stage when the Pope last wrote.



Before looking at the Declaration at all one or two important points need to be cleared up.

1) Its status. A Declaration is the lowest in the ranks of papal utterances. It is issued by the Congregation and submitted in an audience to the Pope who ratifies it and orders its publication.

2) The status of the Commentary, which H242 sqq describes as "official". It is important to clarify this, since H 243 quotes a passage from it which would, if official, be crucial to our discussion. The commentary was distributed to the press on the occasion of the press conference presenting the Declaration. It seems to have been intended as a help to those pressmen who wished to report the Declaration more seriously. No doubt its authors ( who are not named or indicated) were, in the usual Roman style quite content that its authority should be estimated as highly as possible: but in fact it has no authority beyond that of its anonymous authors.

I shall not myself offer any full scale commentary on the Declaration, but merely make a few points about its general lines.

The introduction is obviously intended to forestall more banal objections such as that the Church is -

- constitutionally or inveterately anti-feminist
- oblivious to the signs of the times
- prepared to hush up or ignore Catholic theologians' questionings on the matter

The first thing that strikes one as odd is that the only conclusion drawn from the statement (p.4) "we are dealing with a debate which classical theology scarcely touched upon" should be that "the current argumentation runs the risk of neglecting essential elements". Might not the premiss equally yield the conclusion that "the current argumentation might introduce important new elements"?

As H 242 says the Declaration is an expansion of the statement that "the Church in fidelity to the example of Christ, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly

ordination". This is mainly true of sections 1 - 4, which speak of the Church's constant tradition, whose "practice has enjoyed peaceful and universal acceptance".

- The document goes on to expound
- the attitude of Jesus and the practice of the apostles: their permanent value.
- The Church has no power over the substance of the sacraments

The key passage from our point of view is the two last paragraphs of p.11:

"In the final analysis it is the Church, through the voice of her Magisterium, that, in these various domains, decides what can change and what must remain immutable. When she judges that she cannot accept certain changes, it is because she knows that she is bound by Christ's manner of acting. Her attitude, despite appearances, is therefore not one of archaism but of fidelity: it can be truly understood only in this light. The Church makes pronouncements in virtue of the Lord's promise and the presence of the Holy Spirit, in order to proclaim better the mystery of Christ and to safeguard and manifest the whole of its rich content.

This practice of the Church therefore has a normative character: in the fact of conferring priestly ordination only on men, it is a question of an unbroken tradition throughout the history of the Church, universal in the East and in the West, and alert to repress abuses immediately. This norm, based on Christ's example, has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to God's plan for his Church." (5)

Sections 5 and 6 are only claimed to be illustrative arguments, ex convenientia. But no. 6 does touch two matters which are it seems to me discussed misleadingly.

"to consider the ministerial priesthood as a human right would be to misjudge its nature completely" (5a)

Of course - no one, male or female, has a right to ordination, but it is appropriate to talk of a right to present oneself and have one's vocation tested - unless one is, as the scholastics say 'radically incapable' of ordination. This is the crucial



question about women. I agree here with H 251 sf. But on the Catholic doctrine of vocation the Declaration is right in saying that no conclusive argument can be drawn from the fact that women claim to feel a vocation ( cf. p.17). A vocation is something that the Church attests.

I shall come back in the second part of this paper to what H 242-3 says about some passages of the 'commentary', always bearing in mind what I have said about the status of this document. For the moment, following the sequence of H 243, I want to comment on the U.S.meetings of 1975 which H rightly describes as 'the best reported discussions at a more local level'. A special consultation of experts in various fields took place in June, and its report was incorporated in the ARC statement of the following October. This begins with a clear statement of conviction in line with the Informal Talks statement and indeed with what Cardinal Villebrands said to ECUSA bishops on the occasion of the canonisation of Mother Seton.

"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. The reasons for this conviction will be dealt with more fully in later paragraphs". (6)

The most telling sentence from the June statement (which ARC cites presumably with approval) is

"In the current situation the question of the ordination of women has raised issues which cannot be answered adequately by the mere citing of traditional beliefs and practices." (6a)

The whole section reveals an approach to Tradition carefully worded but ( it seems to me) notably different from that of the first part of the Declaration.

Under the heading "Understandings Already Shared" Section 5 ends thus:

"Both Churches make use of the insights of theological research, incorporating the contributions of anthropology, psychology, history and other aspects of culture to arrive at authoritative decisions." (7)

This seems to me, especially in the light of the Declaration to give a very optimistic account of the identity or similarity of the processes followed in the two Churches to reach authoritative decisions. It brings to mind a remark made by J.Robert Wright of General Theological Seminary, New York, at a recent meeting at the Secretariat, about the very different conditions and relations prevailing between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, at least among ecumenists and academics in the U.S. compared with elsewhere. In view of a statement, also made by Wright, that in that huge country 92% of the Episcopal dioceses regard RC relations as their top priority, this is not unimportant.

In its section 6 "Diversity in Unity", the US ARC statement confronts our own question and edges towards a positive answer.

II

From the last section, 7, "Discerning, Deciding, Doing" I quote one passage which seems to me to point to a root problem raised by comparing the Anglican and RC approaches to OWP.

"The entire body of the faithful is in Baptism anointed with the Spirit, and this one same Spirit, distributing gifts at will, at times manifests itself to the entire body through the prophetic witness of a few, for the sake of the whole. It is the proper role of authority in the Church to encourage and promote discernment of such witness, thus fostering an authentic development while at the same time maintaining the integrity of a normative Christian life and tradition." (8)



The same problem emerges elsewhere - e.g. in an excellent paper put out last July (1977) by William Norgren, who sums up the results of Minneapolis thus:

"...the Episcopal Church has decided through its canonical legislation that women can be ordained to the priesthood and episcopate and that they may be so ordained. At the same time it clearly shows that a consensus on such ordination has not emerged among leaders of the Episcopal Church" (9)

He says later -

"Neither Episcopalians nor the Christian World is obliged to assume that, because the General Convention took a decision on the ordination of women, it has the automatic ratification of the Holy Spirit... There have been false starts and wrong turnings as well as developments which have made headway in the Church and been accepted" (10)

Later still, writing of possible ways ahead for the Episcopal Church, Norgren says:

"Before the Minneapolis decision the Episcopal Church consulted with RC, Orthodox, Old Catholic and Protestant Churches. That process can continue after the decision and may become part of the remote preparation for a council in the distant future... The Episcopal Church would welcome other Churches to observe and evaluate our experience with women's ordination. We will learn if this change in ministry is of the Holy Spirit by the testing of experience." (11)

vers. 38-39

This 'Gamaliel approach' as one might briefly describe it (cf Acts V which I first heard voiced clearly by my friend Arthur Vogel in a seminar we conducted together in Augusta, Georgia, also appeared in the Church of England General Synod of 1975. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself quoted "the favourite phrase of my beloved friend Cardinal Suenens: 'we must remain open to the surprises of the Spirit'" and, referring to many women in pastoral situations which seemed to cry out for ordination, asked whether the Church was not blocking the Spirit by refusing to ordain them. But how does one become aware of 'the surprises of the Spirit', so as not to block them? This is the central question that Sister Irene Benedict raised at the same meeting. "If it were right for women

to be ordained, how would God show this to his Church?" She concluded, referring to Luke VII,22, that it would be possible to have adequate empirical evidence. Peter Staples, addressing a European Anglican/Roman Catholic group, said " the opponents of women's ordination seem to work on the hidden assumption that God is not a being who can say or do something for the first time. I want to examine this hidden assumption, and then go on to ask how one might begin to recognise God's new deeds and hear God's new words.... However does one distinguish between God's new words and deeds, and those of man (or of the devil)? " (11a)

He does recognise that traditional theology, both Catholic and Protestant, assumed 'that God's revelation stopped somehow either with the death of the last apostle or when the last word of the New Testament was written' This idea of course is relevant to our theme if it is assumed that a male-only priesthood is part of revelation.

The notion of the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit is not of course alien to Catholic theology, though it has not always received equal emphasis. "Gaudium et Spes" opens by describing the Christian community as "made up of men; they are brought together in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit along their pilgrim way to the Father's kingdom...;" the Church is led by the Holy Spirit to carry on the work of Christ. The opening paragraph of Part I (paragraph 11) takes us further:

"Believing that they are led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole earth, the People of God sets out to discover among the events, needs and aspirations they share with contemporary man what are the genuine signs of the presence and purpose of God. For faith sheds new light on everything and reveals the divine intention about man's entire vocation, thus guiding the mind towards fully human solutions of problems." (12)

The <sup>second</sup> record of the Pope's letters to Dr. Coggan refers to the Holy Spirit, saying that the trust in Him which has always been the motive force of the search for Anglican/Roman Catholic reconciliation will persist and be still such a motive force.



The text of the C.D.F. Declaration makes only two references to the Holy Spirit. The first is by way of saying that

"On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled them all, men and women (cf Acts 2:1; 1:14), yet the proclamation of the fulfilment of the prophecies in Jesus was made only by "Peter and the Eleven" (Acts 2: 14). "

(13)

The second is in the crucial passage of section 4, p.11, already quoted. " The Church makes pronouncements in virtue of the Lord's promise and the presence of the Holy Spirit..... this practice of the Church therefore has a normative character". (It is at this point that the 'commentary' attempts to stretch matters (H 243) and suggest that 'the whole meaning' of Pope Paul's letters to Dr Coggan is that the Church has already decided that OWP is not a matter for legitimate pluralism. If this were so, there would be little point in our being here).

Thus two Churches appeal to the Holy Spirit but in ways decidedly different: reflecting perhaps two different ideas and modes of authority. I must confess that at this point I am not wholly happy about either appeal. On the one hand, I do not see the force of the 'therefore' in the sentences of the Declaration I have just quoted. It seems to me to assume a great deal about which there could be serious debate. When I turn to the Anglican appeal to the Holy Spirit which seems to be in empirical terms, I am struck by the force of the argument put in the 1975 Church of England Synod by Dame Ridley who first wrote in favour of the ordination of women 48 years ago: "I cannot be sure that it is the will of God that our Church should be torn apart by going ahead now". This may be no more than an argument for delay, but it is at least that, and as such, I should have thought, strong.

H 245 devotes a final paragraph to ARCIC's attitude and record in this matter. As co-secretary of that august body I may perhaps conclude by filling this out a bit. ARCIC's mandate as set out by the Joint Preparatory Commission in the Malta Report and largely approved by Cardinal Bea's letter of June 10th, 1968 and by the Lambeth Conference of 1968, was notably wider than the theological programme which has actually been carried out and has resulted in the three Statements. This <sup>has</sup> been raised in its meetings from time to time, though with diminishing conviction. At Canterbury, 1973, during the meeting which completed the Ministry statement, there was a short discussion which resulted in the co-chairmen addressing a letter to Cardinal Willebrands recommending discussions of the question at provincial/national level. But the recommendation was never passed on or acted on and there was never, anywhere else, serious discussion comparable to that of US/ARC except in the private European group which met at Assisi in November 1975.

When ARCIC met at Chichester during August-September last year to begin the process of reviewing the reactions to its statements, an impassioned statement by Fr Tillard of the growing gravity of this question led to its finding a place (necessarily limited) in the discussions of the sub-commission handling the Canterbury statement. The following points emerged:

- 1) Although there is no consensus on OWP in the Anglican Communion those who support OWP are convinced that it does not imply any change in the conception of ministry as it is expounded in the Canterbury statement. (No indication was given as to how this very wide statement was arrived at, or as to what kind of process had led to <sup>the committee referred to.</sup> H.245 reports the question of J. Robert Wright ( which he repeated while in Rome recently) "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".

My own answer would be that it 'suggests' no more than that OWP did not leap to anybody's mind as an essential point when the passage was being drafted. It does not mean that the commission consciously excluded OWP from the list of doctrinal essentials.

2) What does 'representing Christ sacramentally' imply?

It is not denied that this is an essential of the priesthood - the question is, does it demand maleness or merely humanity?

3) Christ did not redeem only that humanity (male) which he assumed.

4) If the dialogue is to go on (as e.g. Cardinal Willebrands has so vigorously affirmed) it should be extended to the fundamental questions of Christian anthropology which lie behind the opposed attitude to OWP.

(In this connection we may recall that the Cardinal, in his conversation with the group of ECUSA bishops in Rome, stated that the anthropological arguments against OWP are weak and ought not to be pursued.)

Notes

- (1) Partners in Mission (SPCR 1973) p. 41
- (2) Rev. U. T. Holmes, University of the South, Sewance, U. S. A.
- (3) Cf. Partners in Mission, p. 41 (ii)
- (4) The Tablet, July 12, 1975, p. 646
- (5) Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood; (Vatican City 1976) p. 11
- (5a) ibid p. 17
- (6) Statement on the Ordination of Women (m. s.) ARC, Erlanger Kentucky Oct. 21- 4, 1975 , p. 1
- (6a) ibid p. 2
- (7) ibid p. 3
- (8) ibid p. 5
- (9) W. Norgren, "Ecumenical Relations and Ordination of Women in the Episcopal Church"(m. s.) p. 4
- (10) ibid p. 15
- (11) ibid p. 17
- (11a) ed. P. Staples, Assisi Report 1975, Utrecht
- (12) Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today (C. T. C. London 1976) p. 7 and p. 15
- (13) Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood; p. 8