



To the Most Reverend Robert Runcie  
Archbishop of Canterbury

The long but necessary task of evaluating the Final Report of the first Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, in which both our Communion are now engaged, is a vital part of that journey of faith on which we have embarked together in our efforts to re-establish full ecclesial communion. It has been a joy to learn how seriously this task is being taken in so many countries, and how this study is frequently associated with joint action and common witness which express, as far as possible, the degree of communion which has already been brought about between us by the grace of God.

This degree of communion, indeed God's very call to us to be one, also bids us face frankly the differences which still separate us. While the Catholic Church must always be sensitive to the heritage which she has in common with other Christians, she must nevertheless base frank and constructive dialogue upon clarity regarding her own positions.

It was in this spirit that, in an important exchange of letters in 1975-1976, Pope Paul VI affirmed to Archbishop Coggan the position of the Catholic Church concerning the admission of women to priestly ordination, a step at that time being considered by several Churches of the Anglican Communion. The reasons that he then stated briefly for the Catholic Church's

adherence to the long tradition on this matter were set out at length by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Declaration Inter Insigniores of 15 October 1976. This same position was again stated clearly by observers from the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity during the hearing on this subject at the Lambeth Conference of 1978.

I know that Your Grace is well aware of the position of the Catholic Church and of the theological grounds which lead her to maintain it; indeed I am grateful that, in the recent debate in the General Synod of the Church of England, you referred to the implications of this question for Anglican relations with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. But the outcome of that debate prompts me to reaffirm with all brotherly frankness the continuing adherence of the Catholic Church to the practice and principles so clearly stated by Pope Paul VI.

With his well-known affection for the Anglican Communion and his deep desire for Christian unity, it was with profound sadness that Pope Paul VI contemplated a step which he saw as introducing into our dialogue "an element of grave difficulty", even "a threat". Since that time we have celebrated together the progress towards reconciliation between our two Communions. But in those same years the increase in the number of Anglican Churches which admit, or are preparing to admit, women to priestly ordination constitutes, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, an increasingly serious obstacle to that progress.

Pope Paul VI stated that "obstacles do not destroy mutual commitment to a search for reconciliation". We too were "encouraged by our reliance on the grace of God and by all that we have seen of the power of that grace in the ecumenical movement of our time" when we set up the new Commission, whose task includes study of "all that hinders the mutual recognition of the ministries of our two Communions" (Common Declaration, 29 May 1982, No. 3). It is in that same hope, in the charity that "hopes all things" (1 Cor 13:7) but which seeks the unity of Christ's Body by "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15), that I write these words to you, my dear Brother, as we celebrate the Birth of the Lord who came in "the fulness of time to unite all things" (Eph 1:10).

From the Vatican, 20 December 1984

*Joannes Paulus PP II*