

One in Christ

1978

Versailles Consultation ³⁸⁹ Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation on the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood

Introduction

IN November 1975 an informal meeting took place in Rome of Anglicans and Roman Catholics at the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. It recommended in a Note to the Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal Willebrands, President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, that a small Joint Consultation should take place to consider:

To what extent and in what ways Churches with women priests and Churches without women priests can be reconciled in sacramental fellowship.

In November 1976 the Plenary Session of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity accepted the proposal and in May 1977 the Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council also agreed to the suggested Joint Consultation with the terms of reference noted above.

On both sides it was understood that the authority of the findings of the Consultation would be only that of its members.

It was accepted that each Church should appoint five participants. The Roman Catholic members were appointed by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and were as follows:

Fr Yves Congar, OP, Couvent des Dominicains, Paris, France.
Fr Eric Doyle, OFM, Franciscan Study Centre, Canterbury, England.

Fr Pierre Duprey, WF, Under Secretary, Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Revd John Hotchkin, Secretary, United States Bishops' Ecumenical Commission — Co-Chairman.

Mgr William Purdy, Vatican Secretary for Promoting Christian Unity — who also acted as Co-Secretary.

The Anglican members were appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Secretary General of the Anglican Consultative Council and were as follows:

Rt Revd Donald Cameron, Assistant Bishop of Sydney, Australia.
Revd Professor Edward Fasholé-Luke, Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone.

Revd Professor James Griffiss, Nashotah House, U.S.A.
Miss Christian Howard, York, England.

Rt Revd Barry Valentine, Bishop of Rupert's Land, Canada — Co-Chairman.

(Revd Christopher Hill, Assistant Chaplain, Archbishop of Canterbury's Counsellors on Foreign Relations, acted as Co-Secretary).

Though it was envisaged that more than one meeting might be needed, the Consultation was able to complete a Joint Report at Versailles, France, 27 February to 3 March 1978.

The Report

1. Given that certain Churches of the Anglican Communion have ordained women to the presbyterate, the question posed to the Consultation was not to discuss whether or not it is right to ordain women, but to consider 'To what extent and in what ways Churches with women priests and Churches without women priests can be reconciled in sacramental fellowship'.

2. A substantial majority in each Anglican Church accepts the possibility of ordaining women to the presbyterate. Some Churches have already proceeded to such ordinations. At this time no Anglican Church has officially stated that such ordinations are impossible, though some Churches have not yet considered the question officially and others have for various reasons decided not to ordain women at least for the present. The Roman Catholic Church believes that she has not the right to change the tradition 'unbroken throughout the history of the Church, universal in the East and in the West', and considered to conform to God's plan for his Church.

3. Given these two positions the question must be: is it still possible for our two Churches to establish full communion between them and if so how, since full communion presupposes the mutual recognition of ministry? On the one hand could the Roman Catholic Church, which judges it impossible, for theological reasons, to ordain women, recognize such ordinations in the Anglican Communion? How could she hold such ordinations impossible for her yet possible for the Anglican Communion?

4. On the other hand, many Anglicans find it difficult to accept the official Roman Catholic position (as expressed for example in the Declaration *Inter insigniores*) that the ministry of the Church is not open to this development. Many Anglicans consider the ordination of women to be both faithful to tradition and to express a legitimate new development. Within the tension and divergence which they are experiencing over this question, the autonomous provinces of the Anglican Communion believe they are expressing their real sense of unity in diversity.

5. With the Statements of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission and with the sharing and collaboration which are growing everywhere between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, we continue to discover new hopes of unity; hence it has seemed to us necessary to pose the problem in its clearest form. Because of their mutual esteem neither communion can take lightly the fact that the other seems either to do something not warranted by the will of Christ for his Church or to be lacking in sensitivity to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

6. Two things may be seen as ground for hope. First there is the fact that those Anglican Churches which have proceeded to ordain women to the presbyterate have done so in the conviction that they have not departed from the traditional understanding of apostolic ministry (expressed for example in the Canterbury Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission). In the second place there is the fact that the recent Roman Catholic Declaration does not affirm explicitly that this matter is *de jure divino*. These facts would seem not to exclude the possibility of future developments.

7. These developments might well be stimulated by deeper dialogue on those noticeable differences which have been emphasized by this new obstacle — matters such as human sexuality, culture and tradition, freedom and authority, among others. Simultaneously, despite the difficulty in this issue, both Anglicans and Roman Catholics feel themselves committed to continue exploring the new shapes of ministry to which the Holy Spirit may be calling them, as well as to a new sense of unity with one another. The rapidity of change in

our times, the great diversities of culture and circumstance in which the Churches must minister, and the growing characteristic contribution of the Third World to theology, demand openness, flexibility and a readiness to accept and affirm differences in form and style. How this is to be achieved in fidelity to the tradition which we share is one of the challenges which face the Church in our time.

8. While we do not underrate the reality of this obstacle, we are convinced that our communions ought to maintain that deep trust in each other which has been built up over recent years. We have a grave responsibility to continue and intensify co-operation and dialogue in everything that promotes our growing together towards full unity in Christ. In this the Churches will be sustained by their confidence and hope in the Holy Spirit, who alone can bring the effort to fulfilment.