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Present State of Anglican-Roman Catholic Relations: An Assessment*

When the Bishop of Rome, Pope Paul VI, welcomed the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Michael Ramsey, at St Paul's Outside-the-Walls on March 23, 1966, their meeting marked a significant new beginning in the relationship between their two communions. Since that day more than twenty-five years have passed. The official dialogue that ensued from that meeting has resulted in a number of important documents which chart the progress and sometimes the setbacks in Anglican-Roman Catholic relations. That relationship can be traced in three stages. The first stage, the official dialogue carried on by what is now known as ARCIC-I, came to a close in 1982 with the publication of the *Final Report*.¹ The second stage in the dialogue, still in process, is the work of ARCIC-II. Finally, both Communions have begun publishing their official responses to what the dialogue has already accomplished. This essay is an attempt to assess the present state of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations on the basis of those responses.

Official responses to the Final Report

When the *Final Report* was published in 1982, it was presented to the Roman Catholic Church and to the Churches of the Anglican Communion with two questions: first, were agreements contained in the report consonant with the faith of each communion, and second, did they provide a sufficient basis for the next step toward unity? In other words, what was wanted was an official response from each Communion.

The Anglican Response was developed in several stages. In 1985 the Church of England expressed its readiness to accept the ARCIC agreements on Eucharist and ministry, but noted reservations in regard to the question of authority.² In regard to the argument that the historical development of the papacy was a manifestation of the Spirit, the response stated: 'Some would feel that if the argument is to proceed on the basis of historical providence, more evidence must be provided that this development is in accordance with the inner and essential character of the Christian faith'.³

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1. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Committee, *The Final Report* (London: CTS/SPCK, 1982).

2. *Towards a Church of England Response to BEM and ARCIC* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), p. 96.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

The responses of the autonomous Provinces which make up the Anglican Communion were surveyed at a consultation held in 1987 and published in *The Emmaus Report*.⁴ Not all the Provinces were in full agreement with the *Final Report*. To give some examples: the Province of the Church of Kenya noted reservations about certain sections, among them 'the concept of the Real Presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, and the ambiguity of the word *anamnesis* (memorial)'.⁵ The Province of the Southern Cone (of Latin America) rejected ARCIC's conception of a universal primate.⁶ Several Provinces were anxious about whether or not ARCIC allowed for a receptionist understanding of the eucharistic presence.⁷ The Province of the Southern Cone expressed uneasiness at the sacerdotal associations of the word 'priest' despite its official usage throughout the Communion.⁸

The Lambeth Conference of 1988 sought to articulate the mind of the Communion as expressed at the consultation. The bishops gathered at Lambeth agreed that the statements on Eucharist and ministry were 'consonant in substance with the faith of Anglicans' and provided 'a sufficient basis for taking the next step forward towards the reconciliation of our Churches'.⁹ They were more reserved in regard to the statements on authority, welcoming them as offering 'a firm basis for the direction and agenda of the continuing dialogue on authority'.¹⁰

The official response from the Vatican was ten long years in coming. It was preceded by some initial reactions which might have served as an early warning,¹¹ as well as by responses from a variety of Catholic episcopal conferences, indicating some reservations which were more suggestions for future discussion in the dialogue than substantial.

When the official Vatican Response finally appeared in 1991, to say it was a disappointment would be an understatement.¹² Formulated jointly by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, it began by hailing the *Final*

4. *The Emmaus Report: A Report of the Anglican Ecumenical Consultation 1987* (London: Church House Publishing, 1987).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

9. *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference, 1988, The Reports, Resolutions and Pastoral Letters from the Bishops* (London, 1988), Resolution 8, p. 210.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

11. 'Observations on the ARCIC Final Report', *Origins*, 11 (1982), pp. 752-56.

12. 'Vatican Responds to ARCIC-I', *Origins* 21 (1991), pp. 441-47. Some initial 'Observations on the ARCIC Final Report' from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith should have served as an early warning; *Origins*, 11 (1982), pp. 752-56; for a series of Anglican reactions to the response, see *One in Christ*, 1992/1; for the Response itself, *One in Christ*, 1992/1, pp. 38-46.

Report as a 'significant milestone'. But it was quite clear that 'it is not yet possible to state that substantial agreement has been reached on all the questions studied by the commission' and pointed to 'important differences regarding essential matters of Catholic doctrine'.

The most serious reservations were in regard to the question of authority. Noting at most 'a certain convergence', the Response called attention to differences, frankly acknowledged in the *Final Report*, in regard to the dogma of papal infallibility, a lack of any real consensus on the Marian dogmas, and disagreement over the christological foundation of the papacy.

The Response went on to criticise the *Final Report* for not affirming or clearly presenting a host of points of Catholic doctrine not treated in the various agreed statements which constitute it. The Response found the most 'notable progress' in regard to eucharistic doctrine. But it wanted a clearer affirmation of the propitiatory character of the Mass as the sacrifice of Christ that may be offered for the living and the dead, found ambiguity in regard to the mode of Christ's real presence, and a lack of real consensus on the question of the adoration of Christ in the reserved sacrament.

In regard to ministry, the Response criticised the *Final Report* for not addressing the question of the sacramental 'character' of priestly ordination and sought further clarification in regard to the apostolic succession, to affirm a causal relation between unbroken lines of episcopal succession and apostolic teaching. Finally, it argued that for Roman Catholics the historical-critical method is not sufficient for the interpretation of Scripture which must always be linked with the living magisterium of the Church.

In concluding, the Response saw its purpose as pointing to areas in which 'further clarification or study is required before it can be said that the statements made in the *Final Report* correspond fully to Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist and on ordained ministry'.¹³ Here the Response seems to be upping the ante, seeing its task as evaluating ARCIC in terms of 'the *identity* of the various statements with the faith of the Church'¹⁴ which it seems to equate with the traditional language and formulas of the Roman magisterium, for example, the language of the propitiatory character of the Eucharist, the character of priestly ordination which 'configures' the priest to Christ, the foundation of the universal primacy during Jesus' lifetime, an *a priori* guarantee of the truth of magisterial teaching, the Marian dogmas, and the causal relation between apostolic succession and apostolic teaching.

There are two problems which surface here. First, and most important, is the question of methodology.¹⁵ ARCIC from the beginning had sought

13. Vatican Response to ARCIC-I, *One in Christ*, 1992/1, p. 45.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 46, italics added.

15. See Christopher Hill, 'The Fundamental Question of Ecumenical Methodology', *One in Christ*, 1992/2, pp. 136-47.

to use a new theological language. The Preface to the *Final Report* expressed it as follows: 'Acknowledging the growing convergence of our two traditions, we emphasised our avoidance of the emotive language of past polemics and our seeking to pursue *together* that restatement of doctrine which new times and conditions are . . . regularly calling for'. The Response, however, repeatedly emphasises complete agreement or full correspondence with Catholic *doctrine*. What is particularly of concern to most ecumenists is this insistence on 'full agreement' and 'identity' with the faith of the Church – understood as Catholic doctrine – which would make Roman Catholic theological language the norm, rather than an agreement in faith within the context of a broader pluralism of doctrine and theological expression.

The Lambeth response in this respect was more flexible. The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, acknowledged that the Anglican bishops at Lambeth were willing to accept a diversity in theological expression: 'We recognised that not everything in the report was expressed in the terms, language, thought-forms and even theology of the Thirty-nine Articles and the Book of Common Prayer. Nevertheless we believe that the documents on the Eucharist and on ministry and ordination were "consonant" with the faith of the Church as expressed within the Anglican Communion'.¹⁶

Second, the Vatican Response seems to be arguing that Anglican or Protestant Christians must accept the Roman Catholic dogma of papal infallibility in all its particulars, including the Marian dogmas. If this is the case, then Rome is demanding a kind of doctrinal maximalism which other Churches will not be able to accept.

ARCIC-I offered a consensus which represented a more nuanced understanding of papal infallibility. *Authority in the Church II* acknowledged that a 'service of preserving the Church from error has been performed by the bishop of Rome, as universal primate both within and outside the synodal process' (no. 29), even if the Anglican members were unable to affirm that a gift of divine assistance in judgment can be attached to the pope's office 'by virtue of which his formal decisions can be known to be wholly assured before their reception by the faithful' (no. 31).

But the Vatican Response seems uneasy with what the statement says about reception and the assent of the faithful. Reception of magisterial teachings by the faithful does not legitimate magisterial decisions. The Response's insistence that 'the certain knowledge of any defined truth is not guaranteed by the reception of the faithful that such is in conformity with Scripture and tradition, but by the authoritative definition itself on the part of the authentic teachers' seems to suggest that the magisterium can function independently of the faith of the entire Church.¹⁷ As Henry

16 'Archbishop of Canterbury on Vatican Response', *Origins*, 21 (1991), p. 447; *One in Christ*, 1992/1, p. 48.

17. Vatican Response to ARCIC-I, *One in Christ*, 1992/1, p. 41.

Chadwick observed, this approach means for Roman Catholics that 'the truth of a definition depends less on the *content* and more on the primate or the general council by whom the definition is given'.¹⁸

Some commentators tried to place the best interpretation on the Vatican Response. Chadwick argued that the Response was saying 'that the language is not identical with that familiar from the definitions of Trent or Vatican I' and thus 'not so much wrong as less than full'.¹⁹ But he also pointed out that ARCIC-I was concerned with going back to first principles in Scripture and tradition, reaching a foundation 'far-reaching enough to provide a foundation on which remaining questions of disagreement, inherited from different community traditions, ought in time to find fraternal resolution'.²⁰

Other commentators were more critical, even discouraged. A considerable number called attention to the apparent inability of the Response to deal honestly with a plurality of theological formulations. Archbishop Carey pointed out the difference between agreements that were 'consonant' with the faith of the two traditions and the Response's asking if the *Final Report* was 'identical' with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.²¹ The Anglican Bishop of Norwich, Peter Nott, saw 'an expectation that other Churches must conform in every respect to Roman Catholic doctrine for there to be progress towards unity'. This, he observed, 'is not a view acceptable to Anglicans'.²²

J. Robert Wright, a respected American ecumenist and Episcopalian member of ARCIC-I, was perhaps the most outspoken. After objecting to the Response's emphasis on 'identity' and 'complete agreement', rather than the 'substantial agreement' outlined in the *Final Report*, he said: 'Some Anglican ecumenists, privately hoping for better times and regretting that the Roman Church is in the clutches of a conservative papacy fighting a rear-guard action, will no doubt attempt to place a more positive interpretation on the Response. I do not believe this is honestly possible'.²³

Some conclusions

1. Disappointing as the Vatican Response to ARCIC-I has been, it has raised the question of what kind of agreement is necessary before concrete

18. Henry Chadwick, 'Blocked Approaches'. *The Tablet* (1 February 1992), p. 137.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

21. Archbishop of Canterbury on Vatican Response. *One in Christ*, 1992/1, p. 48.

22. Cited in 'Anglican-Catholic Dialogue: warmth and doubts', *One World*, 173 (March 1992) 7.

23. J. Robert Wright, 'Vatican Response to dialogue squelches hope'. *Episcopal Life*, 3 (February 1992), p. 22.

steps towards reconciliation can be taken. This is a significant question, one that needs to be clearly addressed.

ARCIC-I was willing to work on the basis of a 'substantial agreement', an agreement on what J. M. R. Tillard has called the 'axis of faith' which allows for a remaining pluralism of doctrine and expression.²⁴ No claim was made for substantial agreement on the difficult issue of authority, but the members of ARCIC-I found a virtual consensus on this issue and on the basic principles of primacy (*Authority in the Church I*, no. 24).

Both Communions moved away from the language of substantial agreement in their responses. The Vatican Response regretted the lack of 'full agreement on the nature and the significance of the Roman primacy'.²⁵ The Lambeth response found that the documents on Eucharist and ordination were 'consonant' with the faith of the Church as expressed within the Anglican Communion, and only 'convergence' on the more difficult issue of authority and primacy, an area in which *Authority in the Church I* (no. 24) found 'consensus', at least in terms of basic principles.

Thus, the issue of what kind of agreement is necessary remains. Some have suggested that using the formulation selected by the WCC Faith and Order Commission in presenting its *Baptism, Ministry and Eucharist* text to the WCC member Churches might have enabled the two Communions to give more parallel responses. BEM asked the Churches to specify 'the extent to which your Church can recognise in this text the faith of the Church throughout the ages'.

2. It is tempting to react very negatively to the Vatican Response. However, on closer examination, there are still a number of not insignificant reservations and difficulties on the Anglican side as well, as we saw earlier in considering the responses of the various Provinces of the Anglican Communion surveyed in the *Emmaus Report*.²⁶ Thus the agreement and convergence expressed in the *Final Report* cannot be said to be held universally through the Provinces of the Anglican Communion.
3. It may be significant that the Vatican Response does not express any presumption that Anglican orders are 'absolutely null and utterly void', as did the judgment expressed in Leo XIII's 1896 bull, *Apostolicae Curae*.
4. The ordination of women remains a considerable obstacle to progress in Anglican-Roman Catholic relations. The *Final Report* in its Elucidation (no. 5) to the report on *Ministry and Ordination* took the position that the ordination of women should not affect its agreement on ministry, since it 'was concerned with the origin and nature of the ordained ministry and not with the question who can or cannot be ordained'. The Vatican Response

24. See J. M. R. Tillard's discussion of substantial agreement in his 'The Deeper Implication of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue', *One in Christ* 1972/3, pp. 246-7.

25. Vatican Response to ARCIC-I, *One in Christ*, 1992/1, p. 42.

26. See 'Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission: Final Report', in *The Emmaus Report*, pp. 42-77.

however reiterated the view that 'the subject of ordination is linked with the nature of the sacrament of holy orders'. It is by no means clear that this view is widely accepted within the Roman Catholic Church itself. One suspects that in spite of the theological agreement reached between the two traditions on the nature of the ordained ministry, there will be no real progress towards reconciliation until the Roman Catholic Church is able to deal more adequately with the issue of the ordination of women.

5. Some commentators, sensitive to the present climate in the Roman Catholic Church, a climate that Karl Rahner shortly before his death referred to as 'a wintry season', are pessimistic.²⁷ Veteran Vatican watcher Peter Hebblethwaite argues that splendid as the ARCIC methodology might be, the present rejection of Anglicanism represents as well a rejection of the Anglican conciliar process that continues to move towards the ordination of women and towards women bishops.²⁸

6. Finally, even if there is at present an institutional inability to move forward, it remains true that for many Anglicans and Roman Catholics, a new and very different relationship now exists between the two traditions. J. Robert Wright, in spite of his own discouragement, speaks of 'the immense and enormously positive ecumenical good will that has been built up among Roman Catholic laity, priests and theologians in this country over the years since the Second Vatican Council'.²⁹ It remains extremely important to build on this good will.

If the ecumenical climate is 'wintry' today, it is not just because of the Roman Catholic Church. In a recent *Christian Century* article subtitled 'Pilgrimage in Ecumenical Winter', S. Mark Heim points out that today 'even those most actively involved in ecumenical organisations do not agree on the priority of visible unity as an ecumenical aim or on what such unity entails'.³⁰ Heim refers to the WCC Canberra Assembly as an example, where some members were suspicious of the already agreed-upon unity agenda while others were not sure that the WCC's activities were still based on the priority for visible unity expressed in its founding documents. Others have expressed a fear that the election of Konrad Raiser as General Secretary of the WCC and the 'paradigm shift' he proposes signals a change in emphasis from visible unity to a more loosely defined 'fellowship' on the part of the WCC.³¹ With some uncertainty about the present and future direction of the ecumenical movement, it is

27. Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 190.

28. Peter Hebblethwaite, 'Papal response to Anglicans "a museum piece"', *National Catholic Reporter*, 28 (8 May, 1992), p. 14.

29. Wright, 'Vatican response to dialogue', p. 22.

30. S. Mark Heim, 'Montreal to Compostela: Pilgrimage in Ecumenical Winter', *The Christian Century*, 109 (1992), p. 333.

31. Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC, 1991).

perhaps all the more important today that Anglicans and Roman Catholics find ways to move towards the reconciliation and visible union that their dialogue has so long sought.

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While official Church positions demand respect all round, this does not mean that the theological spirit of further enquiry and openness need be diminished. Further enquiry and waiting upon the Spirit will either confirm certain theologies or bring us beyond them. Theological enquiry and an openness to receive what the Spirit is saying to the Churches can at the very least lead to new considerations of the issue. Theology does not exist to undermine official positions. But if it is to serve the whole Church in its ecumenical endeavour, it cannot be denied this right to open enquiry in matters which as yet remain insufficiently examined and explored. The issue and question of women's ordination is an opportunity to test the crucial balance between theology and the teaching authority of the Churches. Such a balance was crucial in the life and to the mind of John Henry Newman. In pleading for openness to the issue of women's ordination at the theological level we would seem to be faithful to his mind and spirit.

from *Things Old and New* by Emmanuel Sullivan, S.A., p. 143.