

# **An Open Letter**

## **on relations between the Anglican Churches and the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholic and Ancient Oriental Churches**

To the Archbishops and Diocesan Bishops of the Anglican  
Communion *June 1977*

1. As members of Anglican Churches in different parts of the world, we thank God for growing fellowship and love between Christians and Churches that stand in the Reformation tradition and those that stand outside it. We are glad of the friendly relations which Anglicans enjoy with the Eastern Orthodox and the Ancient Oriental Churches,<sup>1</sup> and of our full communion with the Old Catholic Church since 1931. We are glad too of the sympathetic and constructive understanding between Anglicans and Roman Catholics which has grown so fast in many countries since the second Vatican Council, and of which the three recent Agreed Statements of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, and the Common Declaration of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope earlier this year, give proof.
2. We heartily welcome closer links with all Churches from which the Anglican Communion remains separated, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Ancient Oriental no less than Protestant, so long as all these relationships have an adequate basis in the theology of the Bible.

Past apprehensions about Anglican rapprochement with non-reformed Christendom, and particularly with the Roman Catholic Church, were in our view well founded, since previously there was no common quest for doctrinal agreement under the authority of Holy Scripture.

But conversations between our Churches on a basis of genuine openness to the Bible now seem increasingly possible. For this we thank God, and record our wish to play a full part in such conversations in the hope of reducing historic differences, humbly believing that we have a distinctive contribution to make in this task.

3. To our joy we find that those who speak for these Churches share our own concern for real and tested theological agreement as a precondition of closer churchly relationships, and our own unwillingness to be hurried into superficiality as we seek this agreement.

To our joy we find also a large measure of agreement with them, larger indeed than we at times find with some of our fellow-Anglicans; in particular, on such essentials as the trinity of God, the givenness of revealed truth in the Bible, the personal deity of Jesus Christ, the nature of sin, atonement and salvation, and the resurrection hope.

To our further joy, we see in them a sense of the wholeness of truth which keeps them from minimising or glossing over unresolved disagreements, as sometimes happens, through desire for ecumenical success, in inter-Protestant discussions.

Section 24 of the recent Agreed Statement on Authority listed areas where Anglicans and Roman Catholics are not yet agreed. This was a healthy sign of theological seriousness, which well illustrates the attitude that we now commend.

4. We also rejoice to find common ground with these Churches in our understanding and experience of spiritual communion with the Father and Jesus Christ his Son, and we are delighted by the stress which Roman Catholics currently lay, and the Eastern Orthodox have always laid, on the ministry of the Holy Spirit as renewer of both the Church and the individual Christian. This common ground in spirituality calls for further exploration: we judge it to be much wider than is often thought.

5. We see need, however, for more discussion, and deeper agreement than yet exists, in at least four fields.

- i. **Scripture and Tradition**

Protestant Churches have in the past been readier to detect corruptions within tradition which the written Scriptures must remedy than to appreciate the necessary and biblically

defined function of tradition in the Church's life and history. We recognise that we have lessons to learn here.

But we are obliged to press the question, whether the non-reformed Churches are yet sufficiently ready to test all their traditions of teaching and practice by Holy Scripture, as we know we are bound to test ours, in order to correct what the theology of the Bible will not justify.

We regret that the Agreed Statement on Authority includes no clear declaration of the full truth of Holy Scripture or its direct authority, as the written Word of God, over the Church and over the consciences of the faithful; the more so, because of the implied assertion, in section 19, of the inerrancy of Ecumenical Councils, which appears to contravene the principle of fallibility expressed in Anglican Article 21.

Acute problems seem to us to arise regarding the status and effect of traditions like the sinless conception and bodily assumption of our Lord's mother, the addressing of prayer to her and others of the faithful departed, the universal primacy of the Pope, and the infallible teaching authority of Popes and General Councils (compare section 24 of the Agreed Statement on Authority). Being additional to Scripture, such traditions cannot rightly be insisted on as conditions of church communion, let alone of ultimate salvation.

We gladly affirm our solidarity with the non-reformed Churches in denying that God gives Christians any right or freedom to abandon anything which Scripture defines as belonging to universal Christian faith and practice.

## ii. Justification

The truth of justification, which bulks large in the Anglican Articles (see nos. 9-18), is of decisive importance in Christian understanding of God's grace, and we regret that it is not on the present agenda of either the Anglican-Orthodox or the Anglican-Roman Catholic commission.

We are anxious to explore whether the Roman Catholic Church now agrees that justification is essentially God's free gift of acceptance, bestowed on sinners by grace alone, in and through Christ, and received by God-given faith alone; and if so, how this bears on traditional Roman Catholic beliefs about good works, merit, purgatory, indulgences, prayer to and for the departed, and the necessity of the sacraments and of communion with the Roman see for salvation.

We are anxious to explore with the Eastern Churches how

they see justification in relation to other aspects of Christ's salvation; little Orthodox writing on the subject seems available at present in the West.

## iii. Church and Ministry

Believing that all communities of the faithful in which 'the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance' (Article 19) are local manifestations of God's one universal Church, we have questions to ask about the grounds on which both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches still apparently claim to be the Church exclusively.

We welcome the view of the Church as God's pilgrim people which marks modern Roman Catholic teaching, and wish to ask what reassessment it entails of older conceptions of the Church as the extension of the Incarnation.

For reasons both theological and pastoral we value the historic threefold ministry. But our view of God's free grace in Christ forbids all thought of any particular historical form of the ministry being integral to the Church's identity, or of any Christian minister participating in the mediatorial work of Christ's high priesthood.

We are disturbed by the lack of theological clarity in section 13 of the Agreed Statement on the Ministry, where it is said that the ministry of ordained clergy 'is not an extension of the common Christian priesthood but belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit'. We call for further explorations here.

## iv. The Holy Communion

While acknowledging that Christians may well differ in their conceptions of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and appreciating the openness of approach to this problem which the Agreed Statement on the Eucharist displays, we are dissatisfied that section 6 of the Statement, read in conjunction with its footnote, appears to favour the idea of a presence resulting from an objective change in the elements against the view that 'the real presence of Christ's most blessed body and blood is not . . . to be sought for in the sacrament, but in the worthy receiver of the sacrament' (Hooker): which historic Anglican view has at least equal claim to consideration.

We think it necessary, for the gospel's sake, to detect and oppose any views of eucharistic sacrifice which obscure the

sufficiency, finality and historical completeness of Christ's one sacrifice for sins on the cross.

The recent Agreed Statements have helped to clarify areas of harmony and of continuing difference on some of these matters of concern. We shall examine the forthcoming report of the Anglican-Orthodox commission with the same concerns in mind.

6. While welcoming and desiring to further co-operation between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in many fields, we do not think that full churchly intercommunion with the Roman Catholic Church, or any other of the non-reformed Churches from which we remain separated, will be appropriate until agreement on the above issues is fuller. It is good to know that they think so too, and look forward to the time when the needed measure of agreement will have been achieved.

7. We deeply regret the divisive effects, both ecumenical and domestic, of recent Anglican ordinations of women to the presbyterate. We, like other Anglicans, are still in debate over the fitness of such action, many (but by no means all) seeing this break with historic tradition as contravening the 'creation ordinance' of male headship. We are unhappy that premature action should disrupt an unfinished theological debate.

8. Should the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures bring our separated Churches to such accord on essential doctrine that relations of full churchly communion are in order, we urge that the Bonn Agreement of 1931 between Anglicans and Old Catholics, which based full communion on agreement in essentials while recognising differences in secondary matters, will in the first instance provide a better model for this purpose than direct mergers or Uniate relationships<sup>2</sup> are likely to do.

We believe that the distinction between essentials and secondary matters, though sometimes overlooked, is of great ecumenical importance, and calls urgently for exploration.

9. We ask that when relations with the non-reformed Churches are debated at Lambeth and elsewhere the points made in this letter will be borne in mind, and that wherever these relations are discussed Anglicans committed to the Reformation tradition may be fully involved. We ask too that the doctrines of grace and

justification, and their implications, may figure prominently on the agenda for these discussions.

10. Finally, we assure you of our prayers and loyalty as you lead us in proclaiming the gospel, in defending what is true and right, and in seeking unity in Christ with all his people.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ancient Oriental Churches include, on the one hand, the Assyrian Church, and, on the other, the Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian and Armenian Churches, which, though commonly called 'Monophysite', are not in fact so in their teaching.

<sup>2</sup> In Uniate relationships complete identity of doctrine with the Roman Catholic Church is required, though the Uniate Churches have a large measure of independence in matters of church order.

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