COMMENT ON *THE CHURCH AS COMMUNION*

FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN, SJ*

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly recognized today that sooner or later, ecumenical dialogues will have to tackle the problem of the nature of the Church: or what is technically called ecclesiology. Some have done so already; others are preparing to do so. The present statement of the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission represents the effort of this commission to meet the requests that have been made for further clarification of the ecclesiological basis of their work. They have chosen to do this by reflecting more fully than they had previously done, on the notion of communion as it is realized in the Church (1). As the title indicates, their statement presents the Church itself as " communion ", highlighting this notion as the key to a theological understanding of the nature of the Church.

To be sure, this is not the first time that the notion of the Chuch as communion has appeared in the ARCIC documents. The term *koinonia* appears

* Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, is a Professor at the Gregorian University, Rome

again and again in the documents produced by ARCIC I. In the Introduction to its *Final Report,* the First Commission chose to present the ecclesiology underlying its work in the light of the notion of communion. In fact, one can find in that Introduction a succint presentation of much of what is developed more fully in the present document. What we have here, then, is not something new, but a more extensive and systematic treatment of the idea of ecclesial communion.

In its introduction, ARCIC II explains that this statement on the Church as communion differs from previous ARCIC reports in that it does not focus specifically on doctrinal questions that have been historically divisive. Rather, its purpose is to give substance to the affirmation that Anglicans and Roman Catholics are already in a real though as yet imperfect communion, and to enable u> to recognize the degree of communion that exists both within and between us. (2) While oustanding difficulties are not explicitly addressed in this statement, the hope is expressed that within the perspective of communion, they can be more clearly understood and are more likely to be resolved. (2) Thus, we are warned at the outset not to look for solutions to such difficulties in this present statement, but rather to be satisfied with the laying of what is hoped will prove to be a solid foundation for their ultimate solution.

The foundation which is proposed here is an ecclesiology based on the concept of communion. This ecclesiology is elaborated by showing how the notion of communion is basic to the scriptural images of the Church; to the role of the Church as sacrament of salvation; to its creedal properties of apostolicity, catholicity and holiness; and finally to its essential unity. We shall indicate briefly some of the key points that are made under each of these headings.

I. Communion unfolded in Scripture

Communion between God and humankind is seen as the fundamental theme of Holy Scripture. All the books of the Old Testament bear witness to the fact that God wants his people to be in communion with him and with one another (7). It is communion with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, which constitutes the people of the New Covenant as the Church (8). In the New Testament, a variety of images conveys the notion of communion: examples are the people of God, flock, vine, temple, bride, body of Christ (13). Communion with the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit, is entered through baptism and nourished and expresseed in the celebration of the eucharist. The community of the baptised, devoted to the apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer *(Acts* 2:42) finds its necessary expression in a visible human community, whose integrity requires appropriate structure, order and discipline. In the New Testament, these various dimensions of communion are discernible, together with a striving towards their ever more faithful realisation (15).

II. Communion: Sacramentality and the Church

The first document produced by ARCIC II, entitled: *Salvation and the Church* (1986), devoted its final section to a study of the role of the Church in the divine plan of salvation. It described this role by declaring that the Church is called to be, and by the power of the Spirit actually is, a *sign, steward, and instrument* of God's design. For this reason, it went on to conclude, the Church can be described as *sacrament* of God's saving work (n. 29).

Thus we see that the present document is not breaking new ground in using the term "sacramentality" in reference to the Church. However, it does make a contribution by bringing out the connection between the two aspects of the Church as "communion" and as "sacrament".

It begins by pointing out how the notion of sacramentality is realised, first of all, in Christ. "By who he was, by what he taught, and by what he accomplished through the Cross and resurrection, he became the sign, the instrument and the firstfruits of God's purpose for the whole of creation" (16). But the Church is also "rightly described as a visible sign which both points to and embodies our communion with God and with one another; as an intrument through which God effects this communion, and as a foretaste of the fullness of communion to be consummated when Christ is all in all" (17).

Vatican II described the Church as " universal sacrament of salvation " *(LG* 48). The universality of the Church as sacrament of salvation for the whole world is also brought out in the present document, which declares: " To speak of the Church as sacrament is to affirm that in and through the communion of all those who confess Jesus Christ and who live according to their confession, God realises his plan of salvation for all the world " (22). This sacramental nature of the Church as sign, instrument and foretaste of communion with God, both now and in the Kingdom to come, is seen as especially manifest in the common celebration of the Eucharist (24).

III. Communion: Apostolicity. Catholicity and Holiness

In this section the Commission develops the idea that it is precisely as a communion that the Church exhibits its qualities of apostolicity, catholicity and holiness.

First, the Church is *apostolic* as a community which shares a common faith based on the witness of the apostles, and which is equipped for its mission by sharing in the apostolic mandate. The apostolic tradition is fundamental to the Church's communion which spans time and space, linking the present to past and future generations of Christians. Responsibility for the maintenance of the

apostolic faith is shared by the whole people of God. The task of those entrusted with oversight in the Church is to keep the community within the bounds of the apostolic faith, by preaching, explaining and applying its truth. By means of those entrusted with the episcopal ministry, the whole Church is made aware of the concerns of the local churches; at the same time, the local churches are enabled to maintain their place and particular character within the communion of all the churches. Thus the Church is apostolic as a communion of apostolic faith and ministry.

Secondly, the Church manifests its *catholicity* by being a communion that is enriched, and not destroyed, by the richness of the diversity with which it is endowed by God. The catholicity of the Church is evident in the variety of liturgies and forms of spirituality, in the variety of disciplines and ways of exercising authority, in the variety of theological expressions of its doctrine. It is only by virtue of its gift of communion that this diversity does not lead to division, but rather brings glory to God. Amid all the diversity which the catholicity intended by God implies, the Church's unity is maintained by its communion in the confession of the one apostolic faith, its shared sacramental life, and its common ministry of oversight.

Thirdly, the Church is holy as the communion of those who seek to be *perfect* as their heavenly Father is perfect. This implies a life in communion with Christ, and a life of love and compassion for one another. At the same time, the holiness of the Church does not mean that it is to be cut off from the world. Rather, its vocation is to be a sign of the communion with God and one another to which all the people of the world are called.

IV. Unity and Ecclesial Communion

While ecclesial communion is in the first place a sharing in the divine life, the Commission insists that it is inadequate to speak of an invisible spiritual unity as fulfilling Christ's will for the Church. The profound communion fashioned by the Spirit requires visible expression, and the purpose of the visible ecclesial community is to embody and promote this spiritual communion with God and with one another.

Ecclesial communion is seen first in the local community, which is a gathering of the baptized brought together by the apostolic preaching, confessing the one faith, celebrating the one eucharist, and led by an apostolic ministry. For all the local churches to be together in the one visible communion that God wills, it is required that all the essential constitutive elements of ecclesial communion are present and mutually recognized in each of them. At this point the Commission observes: " This does not necessitate precisely the same canonical ordering: diversity of canonical structures is part of the acceptable diversity which enriches the one communion of all the churches " (43).

For the nurture and growth of this communion, the Lord has provided a ministry of oversight, which has both collegial and primatial dimensions (45). It is exercised so that unity and communion are expressed, preserved and fostered at every level: locally, regionally and universally. " In the context of the communion of all the churches the episcopal ministry of a universal primate finds its role as the visible focus of unity " (45).

The Commission concludes this section on unity and ecclesial communion by declaring: " As separated churches grow towards ecclesial communion it is essential to recognize the profound measure of communion they already share through participation in spiritual communion with God and through those elements of a visible communion of shared faith and sacramental life they can already recognize in one another. If some element or important facet of visible communion is judged to be lacking, the communion between them though it may be real, is incomplete " (47).

V. Communion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics

Having thus far presented a theological understanding of ecclesial communion, the Commission now proceeds to speak of the actual communion that exists between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. It begins by noting the progress in mutual understanding that has been achieved. The ongoing dialogue has shown that there exists a significant degree of doctrinal agreement between the two churches upon subjects which previously divided them. There has been a sharing of gifts in spirituality and worship. There has been a notable convergence in patterns of liturgy, especially in that of the eucharist. In some areas there is collaboration in various forms of service to the Christian community.

However, the Commission recognizes that there are differences resulting from the centuries of separation, which are not only theological, but cultural as well. In approaching its description of the obstacles to the achivement of full ecclesial communion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, the Commission insists that the agreement which it has reached on the understanding of the nature of the Church as communion should provide a firm basis for examining the unresolved matters which must now be faced together (57).

Four such " unresolved matters " are then briefly described. First, there is " the long-standing problem of the reconciliation of ministries which forms part of ARCIC H's mandate " (57). Next, there are the implications of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate in some Anglican provinces. Third, there is the area of moral issues, which the Commission notes that it is currently engaged in studying. And fourthly, there is the question of authority, which involves a number of specific issues. The following are mentioned: episcopal authority; universal primacy and the office

of the Bishop of Rome ; provincial autonomy in the Anglican Communion ; and the role of the laity in decision-making in the Church.

The Commission concludes: " Serious as these remaining obstacles may seem, we should not overlook the extent of the communion already existing between our two churches... Paradoxically, the closer we draw together the more acutely we feel those differences which remain. The forbearance and generosity with which we seek to resolve these remaining differences will testify to the character of the fuller communion for which we strive " (58).

EVALUATION

ARCIC II is certainly to be commended for its recognition of the need for further clarification of the ecclesiological basis of its work, and for the effort to provide such clarification which the preparation of this document represents. Its choice of the concept of communion as the key to an ecumenical ecclesiology, while it does not break new ground, is undoubtedly the one most likely to prove fruitful.

As I see it, the principal merit of this document is that it demonstrates the very considerable extent to which Anglicans and Roman Catholics share a common ecclesiology. This document shows that they not only recognize that communion is an important concept for ecclesiology, but that they are ready to build their ecclesiology on it as its main foundation. Furthermore, they have taken the trouble to work out the implications of the notion of communion for some fundamental aspects of the nature of the Church, such as its sacramentality, apostolicity, catholicity, holiness, and unity. The extent to which they were able to produce a common statement in all those areas shows how useful the notion of Church as communion can be toward the achievement of a truly ecumenical ecclesiology. ARCIC II must be commended for its present contribution to the achieving of that goal.

However, it is my opinion that the contribution which it has made with this study of *Church as Communion* is a rather modest one. I would not characterize it as a major break-through. Much of what it says has already been said, even in previous ARCIC documents. Its principal merit has been, not to offer new ideas, but to spell out more fully the implications of ideas that were already well known and widely accepted in ecumenical circles. The Commission expressly limited its scope by declaring at the outset that it did not intend to focus on doctrinal isues that have been historically divisive.

At the same time, it seems to me that, even within the limits which the Commission set for itself in this document, it could well have addressed itself to some issues that must eventually be confronted with regard to the very notion of " Church as communion " which was its theme. What I have in mind are questions that refer to the two terms here: those that refer to " Church " and those that refer to " communion ".

My first question has to do with the way the term " the Church " is used in this document. " Church " with a capital C consistently suggests the universal Church of Christ, while " church " in the lower case refers to local churches, or to such particular churches as the Anglican or Roman Catholic. The Church is evidently understood as the communion of the churches. It is recognized in the document that the presently existing communion among the churches is an imperfect one. One question, then, is whether the presently imperfect communion which joins all the Christian churches together is sufficient to justify describing this communion as " the Church ".

Another problem that I have concerning the use of the term " the Church " in this document, is that it is not always clear to me whether it refers to an actually existing Church, or to the Church as it is hoped it will be when complete ecclesial communion has been achieved. The following sentence gives an example of what I mean. " Amid all the diversity that the catholicity intended by God implies, the Church's unity and coherence are maintained by the common confession of the one apostolic faith, a shared sacramental life, a common ministry of oversight and joint ways of reaching decisions and giving authoritative teaching ". (39) Now if the term " the Church " here refers to the " universal Church of Christ " as the presently existing communion of all the Christian communities, it can hardly be said that its unity and coherence are actually maintained by much more than the common confession of faith in Christ and the shared sacrament of baptism. Obviously there is no common ministry of oversight, nor are there joint ways of reaching decisions and giving authoritative teaching. It would seem, then, that " the Church " which is described in this sentence must be the Church not as it is, but as it should be, and as it is hoped it will be when full communion among all the Christian churches has been achieved. It strikes me that it would have been well to say explicitly that this, and indeed much else that is said about " the Church " in this document, corresponds to the ideal, rather than to the actual state of the Church's existence.

It is true, of course, that a Catholic could understand the sentence which we have quoted as referring to the Roman Catholic Church, and I presume that an Anglican could understand it as referring to the Anglican Communion. Of each of these churches one could say that " its unity and coherence are maintained by the common confession of the one apostolic faith, a shared sacramental life, a common ministry of oversight and joint ways of reaching decisions and giving authoritative teaching ". But at the same time, it is also true that several of these terms will mean something different to a Catholic than they do to an Anglican. Realistically, achieving full communion will have to involve arriving at a common understanding of what it would mean in the concrete for the two churches to be united by " a common ministry of

oversight and joint ways of reaching decisions and giving authoritative teaching ".

My second question refers to the use of the term "church" or "churches" with the lower case "c". Here the question is whether this usage implies that all the existing Christian communities have an equal title to the name[44] church ", As is well known, the Second Vatican Council distinguished between "churches and "ecclesial communities" separated from Rome, and said of the Catholic Church something that it said of no other, namely, that the Church of Christ subsists in it. It would seem appropriate in the context of an ecumenical dialogue seeking to establish a common ecclesiological basis for progress toward reunion, to explore the question whether there is agreement that a distinction is properly drawn between "churches" and "ecclesial communities", and if so, on what grounds . Likewise it would seem unavoidable , in a dialogue in which Roman Catholics are partners, to tackle the question whether the Church of Christ can be said to subsist in one church in a way that it does not subsist in others, and what such a claim would mean both for it and for the others.

The other issues I have in mind refer to the notion of communion. The declared purpose of this document is "to give substance to the affirmation that Anglicans and Roman Catholics are already in a real though as yet imperfect communion, and to enable us to recognize the degree of communion that exists both within and between us". But the unspoken supposition of the affirmation that the communion between us is "real though as yet imperfect" is that we already have an idea of what perfect communion would be like, and that we are able to judge our present state of communion against that ideal.

It would seem to me that the present dialogue on "Church as Communion" could have more explicitly addressed itself to the question whether, or to what extent, Anglicans and Roman Catholics are really in agreement as to what "full communion" between them would involve. Actually, a good deal of what is said in this document can be understood as an attempt to describe what full communion among all the Christian churches would be like. But I must confess that it does not seem to me that this fundamental question has been tackled as realistically as it might have been in the context of this dialogue.

One passage that speaks of "complete communion" among the churches is the following:

> For all the local churches to be together in communion, the one visible communion God wills, it is required that all the essential constitutive elements of ecclesial communion are present and mutually recognized in each of them. Thus the visible communion between these churches is complete and their ministers are in communion with each other. This does not necessitate precisely the same canonical ordering: diversity of canonical structures is part of the acceptable diversity which enriches the one communion of all the churches (43).

This last sentence leaves a very large question to be answered: how great a diversity of canonical structures would be acceptable? Are Anglicans and Roman Catholics likely to have the same idea about the acceptable limits of such diversity? Would they not be inclined to judge the limits of such acceptable diversity in the light of the diversity allowable in their own churches?

The passage we have quoted also describes visible communion among churches as being complete when all the essential constitutive elements of ecclesial communion are present and mutually recognized in each of them. The question, then, is whether this document provides a realistic description of "all the essential constitutive elements of ecclesial communion " which would have to be present and mutually recognized for visible commu - nion between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church to be complete. An enumeration of such "constitutive elements" is given in section 45. Among them are the confession of the one apostolic faith, revealed in the Scriptures and set forth in the Creeds ; the one baptism ; the one celebration of the eucharist ; a shared commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his Church ; acceptance of the same basic moral values ; a ministry of oversight entrusted to the episcopate , with both collegial and primatial dimensions; and the episcopal ministry of a universal primate.

Without doubt all these are constitutive elements of full ecclesial communion. What seems to me to be lacking here is the realistic recognition of the fact that practically all of them, as expressed here, leave the "hard questions" still to be answered. Would the acceptance of the Scriptures and the Creeds be a sufficient basis for full communion in faith? What are the conditions for full communion in the celebra - tion of the eucharist ? Beyond the acceptance of the same basic moral values, must there be agreement on specific moral norms ? How are the collegial and primatial dimensions of episcopal oversight to be exercised, and to be reconciled with one another ? And what would the episcopal ministry of a universal primate really involve?

It is not my intention to suggest that in this document, ARCIC II should have attempted to answer all these questions. What I wish to say is that I think it could have been more realistic in its approach to the fundamental question as to what full ecclesial communion " between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church would mean. The basic problem is that we are inevitably inclined to project a model of "full communion" in the light of the kind of communion which we already know in our own churches. Ecumenical dialogue on the theology of ecclesial communion should be the occasion for each of us to take a critical look at the kind of communion that we already know in our own churches. The atmosphere of ecumenical dialogue should also allow us to be mutually critical

of the kind of communion that we see in one another's churches . Through such frank dialoguing , Anglicans might come to the conclusion that the kind of communion they already enjoy lacks something which would be needed for full communion with the Catholic Church , and Catholics might see that there are elements in Catholic communion as we presently know it, which ought not be laid down as requirements for full communion with the Anglican Church.

The present document has certainly made a contribution to the ecumenical discussion of the Church as communion, but I think it could have made a more incisive contribution had it made a more realistic attempt to achieve a consensus between Anglicans and Catholics as to the conditions that would have to be met for the achievement of "full communion" between their churches.