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Anglican bishops given firm RC view on woman priests

By Robert Nowell

Regret that the churches of the Anglican Communion had gone about the question of the ordination of women in the way they had was expressed yesterday when the Lambeth Conference dealt with that divisive issue. The bishops, meeting at Kent University at Canterbury, were given a strong reminder of the firmness of Rome's stand on the matter.

Canon John Macquarrie, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, said in his introductory paper: "It would surely have been wise if individual churches had deferred action until this Lambeth Conference had given some guidance in the name of the whole Anglican Communion, following on the study and reflection recommended by the Lambeth Conference of 10 years ago."

But it was no longer just an academic debate; some Anglican churches had already ordained women.

While he favoured the ordination of women, he had also consistently maintained that the church should wait until there was a substantial consensus. "I do not think that a 1,900-year-old tradition can be overturned by a simple majority vote at perhaps a single meeting of the governing body of one part of the church", he said. He was most unhappy about the way in which the church in the United States had gone about the question.

While every theology was culturally and socially conditioned, which put a question mark against arguments against the ordination of women drawn from the New Testament, the reverse was also true, he said.

There was also the question whether consensus should be just within each particular national, or regional, church, or whether on such an important and potentially divisive issue, one should not look for a consensus beyond that; although he

thought it would be asking too much for the Anglican Communion not to act without a consensus including Rome and the Orthodox Churches.

Finally there was the question of how churches with and churches without woman priests could live together. In Anglicanism, they had to reach, with reasonableness and mutual respect, a *modus vivendi* between those who accepted women as priests and those conscientiously unable to do so.

The conference also heard pleas for restraint from Roman Catholic Orthodox, and Old Catholic observers and from a Methodist observer, Dr Kenneth Greet, witness to the 30 years' debate within British Methodism before woman ministers were finally accepted.

Speaking on behalf of the Vatican's Unity Secretariat, Bishop Cahal Daly, of Ardagh and Clannacnois, Ireland, reasserted the firmness with which Rome opposed the ordination of women. His intervention was clearly meant to counteract some of the interpretation of the report published last week on the joint Anglican/Roman Catholic consultation on the subject at Versailles.

The tradition on which the Roman Catholic Church took its stand, Bishop Daly said, was unbroken and universal in East and West, and was a tradition so firm and decisive as not to have needed formulation or defence.

Bishop Desmond Tutu, secretary of the South African Council of Churches, drew a parallel with the experience of apartheid. "Those of us who have been victims of a system of injustice and oppression know how women feel in this matter", he said.

The balance of the 25 speeches made seemed to favour some kind of pause for thought and consultation; but how representative the 25 who spoke (out of wishing to do so), were is something that will be shown only during the conference's final week.