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18th December 1985

Your Eminence,

The letter sent to me by His Holiness Pope John Paul II of December last year concerning the question of the admission of women to priestly ordination is one of great importance and weight. As I have explained to His Holiness, I have needed time for reflection and consultation within the Anglican Communion before making a considered and substantive reply. I am deeply conscious that such a letter would not have been written if the Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church were not deeply committed to the search for full ecclesial unity and that the far reaching progress already achieved may appear to be checked by the actual admission of women to the priesthood in some Anglican Provinces - and its possibility in others including the Church of England.

In my letter to the Holy Father I have stated that those Provinces which have acted in this matter have done so for serious doctrinal reasons. I have also said to the Holy Father that I feel an obligation to explain this more fully to you both out of respect for the integrity of those Anglican provinces which have so acted and because an authentic ecumenical dialogue must be built upon the utmost candour as well as charity. It is my sincere hope that this letter will help the Roman Catholic Church to interpret the opinions and actions of the Churches of the Anglican Communion more intelligibly and sympathetically, while still dissenting from the position of some Anglican Provinces in admitting women to the ministerial priesthood.

In the first place it must be said that the Holy Father's statement of the position of the Roman Catholic Church will clarify the dialogue between our churches. Those responsible for the dialogue between us will be able to pursue their task more realistically by knowing that the position of the Catholic Church remains the same as it was in the exchange of letters between Pope Paul VI and my predecessor, and more fully set out in the Declaration of the Sacred Congregation of the Faith Inter Insigniores of 1976. Ecumenical dialogue must be based

on the presentation of the authentic positions of the Churches. While some Roman Catholic theologians may have suggested otherwise to Anglicans, I understand the Holy Father's letter as affirming that the Roman Catholic Church believes that it has no right to change a tradition unbroken throughout the history of the church, universal in the East and in the West, and considered to be truly Apostolic.

On the Anglican side there has been a growing conviction that there exist in Scripture and Tradition no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood. This has been expressed synodically by a number of provinces. Within the internal debate upon this matter - a debate which has developed with growing intensity for over forty years - Anglicans would generally doubt whether the New Testament by itself alone permits a clear settlement of the issue once and for all.

When we turn to the Tradition of the universal Church, those Anglican Provinces which have proceeded to the ordination of women to the presbyterate have done so with the sincere conviction that the Tradition is open to this development, because the exclusion of women from priestly ministry cannot be proved to be of 'divine law'. Nor have they intended to depart from the traditional understanding of apostolic ministry. Nevertheless, I recognise that in view of the universal Tradition of East and West, it is insufficient simply to state that there are no fundamental reasons against the admission of women to the priesthood. For so significant a theological development it is not enough to assert that there are no reasons against such a proposed action. It is also necessary to demonstrate compelling doctrinal reasons for such a development.

Leaving aside sociological and cultural considerations, as these bear mainly upon the question of whether such ordinations would be opportune, I feel an obligation to report to Your Eminence what I consider to be the most substantial doctrinal reason, which is seen not only to justify the ordination of women to the priesthood by some Anglican Provinces, but actually to require it.

The fundamental principle of the Christian economy of salvation - upon which there is no question of disagreement between Anglicans and Roman Catholics - is that the Eternal Word assumed our human flesh in order that through the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ this same humanity might be redeemed and taken up into the life of the Triune Godhead. In words common to both our liturgical

traditions: "As he came to share in our humanity, so we may share in the life of his divinity".

It is also common ground between us that the humanity taken by the Word, and now the risen and ascended humanity of the Lord of all creation, must be a humanity inclusive of women, if half the human race is to share in the Redemption he won for us on the Cross.

Some Anglicans would however then go on to point to the representative nature of the ministerial priesthood. They would argue that priestly character lies precisely in the fact that the priest is commissioned by the Church in ordination to represent the priestly nature of the whole body and also - especially in the presidency of the eucharist - to stand in a special sacramental relationship with Christ as High Priest in whom complete humanity is redeemed and who ever lives to make intercession for us at the right hand of the Father. Because the humanity of Christ our High Priest includes male and female, it is thus urged that the ministerial priesthood should now be opened to women in order the more perfectly to represent Christ's inclusive High Priesthood.

This argument makes no judgement upon the past, but is strengthened today by the fact that the representational nature of the ministerial priesthood is actually weakened by a solely male priesthood, when exclusively male leadership has been largely surrendered in many human societies.

I must also say something of the experience of those Anglican Churches which have taken the step of admitting women to the ministerial priesthood. While honesty compels me to acknowledge deep division on this matter amongst Anglicans - even to the extent of tensions which strain the bonds of communion - those Provinces which have taken this step have indicated to me that their experience has been generally beneficial. Nor have they yet heard compelling arguments to abandon this development. It is also possible that some other Provinces of the Anglican Communion will take similar decisions in their respective Synods.

It is however by no means a foregone conclusion that the General Synod of the Church of England will immediately move in such a direction, for it is not yet clear whether a sufficient consensus has been reached to effect the proposals called for by the Synod last November which prompted the Holy Father's letter. Other Anglican

Provinces have also indicated to me that they are unlikely to ordain women in the immediate future. While Anglican diversity of opinion and practice must be a difficulty for the Roman Catholic Church, I believe it is also an indication of the fact that Anglicans are still seeking the will of God in this matter. Nor can this be discovered by either of our Churches without the wider, general study and experience of the role of women in the community of the Church. In this context the admission of women to the diaconate in Anglican Churches is important, as is the ministry of women religious within the Roman Catholic Church.

As you already know, I am not myself convinced that action should be taken on ordination to the presbyterate by Anglicans alone, no matter how convincing the positive arguments, until there is a wider consensus in our Churches. I believe the argument for ecumenical restraint is also a doctrinal one because it is only in such a wider perspective that particular churches can truly discern the mind of the whole Church.

At the same time realism, together with an acquaintance with the history of the Church, prompts me to recall that until such time as Christians have clearly discerned the mind of the Church in matters of contention, there has often arisen sharp discussion, debate and even conflict. It is indeed through such conflict and debate that the truth is often discerned. You will already know that the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood is the occasion of such sharp debate within the Anglican Communion at the present time. I also recognise that this development appears to be a serious obstacle to the eventual reconciliation of our churches and have expressed this in my letter to the Holy Father.

It is at such difficult times that dialogue is essential. This is especially necessary in the light of the increasingly close relationship which has developed between the Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church in many parts of the world and in view of the crucial stage we are reaching as we engage in the task of evaluating the Final Report of the first Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. It is also urgent in the light of the constructive letter you have sent to the Co-Chairmen of the ARCIC on the question of the reconciliation of ministries. I believe that letter provides the proper context for the dialogue I have proposed to the Holy Father. As the International Commission cannot fail to have to examine the ordination of women if it is to fulfill its mandate "to study all that hinders the mutual recognition of the ministries of our Communion" (Common Declaration 29th May 1982), I also believe the Commission will be the right forum for this difficult discussion. Having said this it may be

that we should envisage the possibility of some strengthening of the Commission by the addition of special consultants for this particular task.

Your Eminence will know that the writing of my letters to the Holy Father and yourself has been no light matter. When sister Churches have been estranged for four hundred years, but at last begin to see tangible signs of reconciliation, it is particularly painful to find this new obstacle between us. But in writing this fuller letter to you I have been helped by our personal friendship and by my absolute confidence in your sympathetic understanding of the Anglican position. I hope I have been able to express my consciousness of the reasons why the Roman Catholic Church finds itself unable to accept the ordination of women to the priesthood.

Though we do not yet see the way forward from what at present appears to be mutually incompatible positions - at least where some Anglican Provinces have actually ordained women to the priesthood - I am given hope by the fact that those who began the doctrinal dialogue between us twenty years ago did not themselves see the end from the beginning. May the same Holy Spirit which assisted them in the search for agreement in faith, and whose Report both Churches are in the process of evaluating and receiving, also assist their successors who will, should the Holy Father be in agreement with my proposal, have the weighty responsibility for seeking a way forward.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Archbishop of Canterbury

His Eminence Cardinal J G M Willebrands,
Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.