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"UNITY AND COMPREHENSIVENESS"

by

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According to the minutes of the Gazzada meeting the scope of this paper (No. 7) was to be as follows: "To what extent can or should there be diversity in a united church? Freedom and authority." Our recollection, however, is that the word "comprehensiveness" played a large part in the discussion and that at least part of our brief was to give some account of this notion, both in theory and in practice. We felt however that in this context the problem of comprehensiveness is virtually indistinguishable from that of diversity in (or within) unity. In this paper we shall move from more or less general and abstract principles to the more specific cases where, at least prima facie, there would seem to be divergence between Anglican and Roman Catholic understanding of the limits of permissible diversity, or the extent of desirable comprehensiveness.

We can begin with some almost platitudinous observations about which, we take it, there is no Anglican-Roman Catholic controversy. When we speak of unity, the restoration of full unity between Rome and Canterbury of which we spoke in our Gazzada communiqué, we are not thinking merely of administrative and juridical re-arrangements which would bring practical benefits. Christian unity is sometimes argued for in terms which are largely pragmatic. And the models of a reunited church which are put before us sometimes owe more to the worlds of politics and commerce than to the Gospel. (Cf. Professor Ian Henderson's recent attack on Anglicanism in terms of political "conspiracy" and "imperialism".) Of course there are good practical, economic, administrative reasons for the reunion of separated Churches, but in themselves they are neither the ground nor the justification for ecumenical hope. The only unity worth having is unity in truth, and the hope for its achievement rests not upon the skill of ecclesiastical negotiations but upon the agreed theological datum that unity is God's will.

One could elaborate upon this at length, but it is necessary to say at least this much in order to establish some kind of background for a discussion of diversity, or diversity in unity. We are not interested in that kind of unity which would be based on a series of lowest common denominators in belief and practice. Because we take unity more seriously we must leave no doubt in anyone's mind that a collection of diversities, given a new name would be no realization of unity. A merely permissive attitude to diversity would fail to do justice to the theological ground of unity. In this context there can be no proper analogy between the Church and the permissive, liberal-democratic state. Such a state can afford a wide margin of tolerance in, say, matters of political, moral or religious opinion. So long as the rights of others are not interfered with, and accepted standards

of behaviour not flagrantly broken or mocked, anything goes. You may even, as a matter of right, hold quite outrageous opinions. But unless you try to force them on others or shout them from the housetops, the state will not busy itself to correct you.

If it were thought that this political situation offered an analogy for a reunited Church, extraordinary things would follow. All opinions and beliefs would be permissible; or, to put the other way, none would be obligatory. It would be as though the Church were saying, "For the sake of unity - or for the sake of giving the impression of unity to the outside world - we will all observe certain outward rules. But privately, of course, you can believe as you please or not believe at all"

As against any such point of view we should want to argue - perhaps at first sight paradoxically - that any merely permissive attitude to diversity fails and must be ruled out not because it is heedless of real unity but because it does not take diversity itself seriously enough. To explain this, we shall have to look more closely at what we mean by rightful (or even necessary) diversity in the Church. It is now a commonplace to accept this rightfulness. Few voices are raised in favour of rigid uniformity; in fact everyone takes pains to emphasise that unity and uniformity are very different things. The fact of diversity, then, which has sometimes been condemned and sometimes feared, has become theologically respectable. But if this new respectability is more than pragmatism or an adjustment compelled by a pluralistic society, we shall have to be confident in its theological underpinning.

No one needs to be told that diversity, or comprehensiveness, is not only a significant but central part of Anglican tradition. Historically, of course, this tradition owes much to the vicissitudes of the English Church in the 16th and 17th centuries. But Anglican divines, then and since, have maintained that this tradition is not merely something which historical circumstances forced upon the Church. They have, to the contrary, claimed that comprehensiveness is a necessary quality in any Church which pretends to catholicity, that it is in this sense a mark of the Church and that its absence turns church into sect. But at the same time none would deny that the ideal of diversity in unity creates problems and tensions, both theological and practical. One of these, for us, especially since the beginnings of the ecumenical movement, is the problem of explaining the Anglican position to her separated Christian brethren. To the non-Anglican that position sometimes looks like no position at all. Yet perhaps at the same time it has held a certain fascination, for the Anglican quest did not begin and end in England, and today the Provinces of Canterbury and York form but a small minority of the world-wide Anglican Communion of autonomous Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury.

One aspect of the non-Anglican's puzzlement was brought out in a recent interview which the Archbishop of Canterbury gave for Italian Television:

Question: "Your Grace, what exactly is the distinction between High Church and Low Church?"

The Archbishop of Canterbury: "Our Church of England has two aspects. On the one hand we claim to be a Church possessing Catholic tradition and continuity from the ancient Church, and our Catholic tradition and continuity includes the belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, the order of Episcopacy and the Priesthood, including the power of priestly absolution; these are parts of the Catholic continuity as we have it. We also possess various institutions belonging to Catholic Christendom, like monastic orders for men and women. That aspect of Catholic sacramental life and continuity is especially emphasized and cherished by people called High Church.

"Our Anglican tradition has another aspect as well. We are a Church which has been through the Reformation and values many experiences derived from the Reformation, for instance the Open Bible; great importance is attached to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, and to personal conviction and conversion through the work of the Holy Spirit, and that aspect of our church life - the aspect connected with the Reformation, the Open Bible and the personal conviction and conversion - is cherished specially by people sometimes called Low Church.

"But I want to emphasize that though there is High Church and Low Church, it is all the time one Church with a single life, and all the members of our Church share together in the Creeds, Holy Scriptures, the Sacraments, the rule of the Bishops and the liturgy; so do not think of High Church and Low Church as utterly separate factions, but as two aspects of the life of a Church which is all the time one."

The Archbishop does not here use the word comprehensiveness, but the idea of diversity in unity is what he is talking about and the way he approaches his answer to the question is very typically Anglican.

Before we look further at the theological questions, this is perhaps the place to record Anglican fascination with recent Roman Catholic emphasis upon the rightfulness of diversity within the Church. Quite apart from the diversities of approach which so many Roman Catholic theologians have manifested since the Council, we think in particular of utterances by Pope John and Pope Paul and of passages in the decrees of the Council. It may be useful to cite several of these in the hope that our discussions might profit from close attention to them.

We would suspect that a most important keynote was struck by Pope John's allocution at the opening of the Council. After stressing the fact that the Council was not convened to define "new" doctrines, or to adjudicate between varying theological opinions, or simply to reiterate traditional teaching he went on to say,

"The whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith, is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."

This latter sentence is often quoted and would seem to provide the charter for a liberality and diversity in theological interpretation. Certainly that diversity was marked and unhampered in the actual proceedings of the Council.

The same theme was part of Pope Paul's allocution at the opening of the Second Session. In speaking of his hopes for the restoration of Christian unity he said that this

"visible union cannot be attained except in identity of faith and by participation in the same sacraments and in the organic harmony of a single ecclesiastical control, even though this allows for a great variety of verbal expressions, movements, lawful institutions, and preferences with regard to modes of acting."

This allowance and recognition of variety recurred in his allocution at the opening of the Third Session when, after speaking of "the long, sad history which led up to the various separations" he went on to "recall the words of the Apostle Paul, who brought the gift of the Gospel to all nations, seeking to become all things to all men. Such an adaptability as we might today be tempted to call pluralism in practice" "Pluralism in practice" would seem a very apt motto for a united Church

which wished to allow for diversity in unity.

A number of the decrees of the Council give further embodiment to these principles, but we recall especially some passages in the decree on ecumenism. For example in No. 4 it is said,

"While preserving unity in essentials, let all members of the Church, according to the office entrusted to each, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaboration of revealed truth. In all things let charity be exercised."

The same point is made, even more forcibly in the section of the decree dealing with the Orthodox Churches of the East, and is re-inforced by passages in the recently published Directorium on ecumenism. In one sense, of course, we realize that this recognition of rightful diversity in the Eastern Churches (i.e. diversity from many Latin rules and practices) is no new thing. But it would seem to make more public and prominent a certain comprehensiveness which already belongs to the Roman Catholic Church.

Finally, in the decree on ecumenism (No. 11) there is an interesting passage which seems to bear upon any Roman Catholic attitude to diversities of Christian attitude and expression within the whole body of Christian Churches and Communities. "When comparing doctrines, they [theologians] should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith." This notion of a hierarchy of truths, when taken in conjunction with the other pronouncements we have mentioned, would seem to encourage that kind of dialogue which could only proceed fruitfully if a certain theological diversity were not only recognized but welcomed.

No doubt these quotations are all patient of more than one interpretation - like many Anglican pronouncements - but we have felt it worthwhile to cite them here as a basis for discussion. If there is a Roman Catholic uncertainty about the definition of Anglican diversity, there is now also an Anglican uncertainty about the interpretation and repercussions of recent Roman Catholic utterances. It is our feeling that new developments have brought our positions nearer together, but only further dialogue will show the extent of the agreement and disagreement which will now be our starting point.

We can now return to the more general theological considerations which seem to us fundamental in any search for the justification of diversity or comprehensiveness in the Church. We have said that any merely pragmatic or indifferentist attitude to diversity fails because it does not really take diversity seriously. In our view the place for diversity within the unity of the Church is dictated not by exigencies of history or the convenience of ecclesiastical organisation, but by the mystery of Christian faith itself. It is a constant Biblical as well as patristic theme that God is not only beyond our powers of comprehension but also beyond any words which human beings, in theological and doctrinal formulations, can find to express their understanding of His nature and will. (Compare, for example, St. Hilary of Poitiers on the Arian struggle and the Council of Nicaea.) It would seem to follow from this that in the Church there must always be allowance for a diversity of words and images used and tried for evoking something of the fullness of that mystery. Fullness of expression is beyond us, but in any age (and perhaps in our own most notably) there is the need for diversity in expression. At times this diversity may become so great that the very unity of the faith seems to be threatened. This will always be a danger (as it was felt to be in the early Church when St. Paul insisted upon the rightfulness of his Gentile mission), but history would seem to show that tensions and struggles are necessary if anything like the fullness of the faith is to be evoked and communicated. The very imagery of the One Body - as St. Paul understood it - requires a diversity not only of gifts but of expressions. If we understand revelation as active, dynamic, and personal, we shall also understand it as taking place within the continuing human circumstances of struggle and dialogue.

The importance of diversity is, as it were, both horizontal and vertical. In any particular age more than one set of words and images is necessary if Christian truth is to transcend cultural differences. Similarly, in ages separated by time and circumstance there is bound to be variety and divergence in expression and understanding. Otherwise the Church will be in danger of lapsing into what Michael Novak aptly called "non-historical orthodoxy". It is our impression that, following Fr. Schillebeeckx, the fundamental "battle of mind" witnessed by the Council lay precisely here. The very dynamism and inner life of Christian faith depends upon development, and that means the recognition of the need for diversity, at any time, in theological method and exploration. (In this connection we find interesting Pope Paul's recent "re-instatement" of Duns Scotus. It might be said that this was only the encouragement of diversity in philosophy, but we doubt whether one can really draw so neat a line between philosophy and theology. The acceptance of certain philosophical and metaphysical modes to a great extent determines theological attitudes and expressions.) We should also want to claim that what is true about the place of diversity in theology proper also applies in other aspects of the Church's life: worship, discipline, etc.

But having recognised the essential character of diversity we are not unaware of the problems it creates. These would seem to pose the fundamental theological problems for the discussion. How are we to keep diversities in balance with the demand for unity in truth and faith? We will not even attempt any general answer to this question, but we see two sorts of problems which should occupy a central place in dialogue. The first are more theoretical. How is essential continuity in faith to be understood and guaranteed? Can this be rightly confined to verbal and juridical categories? Given the continual need for theological development, what are to be the criteria for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate development in doctrine, belief and practice? Traditionally it has of course been allowed that on many matters there may be varieties of theological opinion. But this has been balanced by the insistence that such variety is not permissible in matters of "defined" doctrine. We find this less simple than it looks, for there are always problems about the meaning of definitions, so that we find it hard to understand how definitions can be considered static and, as it were, self-explanatory. The history of Christian doctrine would seem to show that there has been ^{no} less controversy about the rightful interpretation of certain definitions than about doctrines undefined (e.g. Atonement). Once again it is problems about method and criteria of interpretation which need closest attention. Definition as such does not foreclose discussion. (Do we "understand" the Chalcedonian definition precisely as the fathers of Chalcedon understood it? Or did ever all of them understand it in exactly the same way? Did all of the fathers of Vatican II understand "collegiality" in precisely the same way?)

The second sort of problems (while by no means untheological) have more to do with the practical needs of the Church in the world. Here we are thinking of two contrasted but complementary needs. Many Anglicans would insist no less than Roman Catholics on the need for a focus and centre of authority in the visible Church - pastoral in purpose and intention, but also unavoidably juridical. We should even want to say that the more diversity was cherished, the greater the need for such a centre and focus. Some Christian communities, because of their distaste for any diversity in their body, perhaps have less sense of need for such a focus. Their unity is defined by a kind of strict uniformity and identity, and to express any diversity would simply be to leave the body. But in a re-united Church which not only allowed but welcomed diversity, the need for some kind of visible focus would seem to us clear. This of course leads into highly controversial questions, and at the moment (to take only three examples) Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican views on the nature and scope of this visible centre obviously diverge. There are signs that we are coming closer together here, but lengthy discussion and dialogue is essential.

The complementary need is for a great freedom and flexibility in the structures of the Church so that it can always be responsive to the movements

of the Spirit. Here there are many varieties in Anglican thinking (and perhaps also in Roman Catholic thinking). But we should be inclined to say that, as in the political order, freedom and flexibility can only be maintained within a settled structure of authority.

As dialogue proceeds we may all be in for surprises on the way to restoration of unity. Those who are most concerned to defend rightful diversity may find that only within an accepted visible unity can diversity be developed and defended against sectarian tyrannies. Those most concerned with a visible authority and unity may find that without the acceptance of diversity, unity shrivels into narrow sectarianism and denies itself the power of growth and development.

These then are some of the fundamental issues, as we see them, for profitable dialogue on unity and comprehensiveness. We have not taken our brief to extend to any detailed discussion of particular doctrinal and other issues which appear to separate Anglican and Roman Catholic positions. But perhaps we can mention some of these, in the hope that our discussion may help to clarify Anglican minds on Roman Catholic attitudes about the rightfulness and limits of diversity, i.e. of comprehensiveness within the Church. In our Gazzada discussions several issues were brought out: Mariological, liturgical, devotional, and moral. On these issues we should like to put questions about what the Roman Catholic Church might insist upon in any re-united Church. In Mariology, for example, what are the limits of diversity, say, in interpretations of the dogma of the Assumption? In devotion, how are Anglicans to distinguish between practices which Roman Catholics consider essential to Christian faith and those which, however valuable in certain contexts, are not considered essential? In liturgical practice, how far is experimentation and variety to be encouraged and at precisely what points is it denied?

Moral questions deserve far more attention than we can give them here, but our feeling is that these may become increasingly important as dialogue develops. As we see it, there are three areas. First, and uncontroversially, there are many moral questions on which we have no fundamental disagreement, any more than any Christians. Second, there are questions upon which we both allow legitimate divergence of conscience, e.g. pacifism. Third, the questions on which we diverge fundamentally, e.g. birth control. As we see it, reunion will perhaps encounter as many problems in the moral sphere as in the purely theological one. For example, we cannot conceive of a situation in which - in a re-united Church - the Anglican position on birth control was denied.

At this juncture we deliberately leave out of account two very important questions. Mixed marriages, we agreed at Gazzada, should be referred to a special and separate commission. Clerical celibacy, which we regard as a matter of local discipline, has perhaps taken a new turn in the light of the most recent papal pronouncement. But we assume that this remains a matter of discipline. In any case, the Anglican position is known to us all. But how far, in the West, can the Roman Catholic Church meet the Anglican position if we are to move forward to a restoration of unity? In one sense this is a very secondary question, but in practical and public terms it is very important.

Finally, we think we can express the deep appreciation of Anglicans at the moves towards "comprehensiveness" which the Roman Catholic Church has evidenced in and through Vatican II. In this paper we have tried to point to general principles and practical problems, only in the hope that our discussions will aid to clarity on both sides.