

Relations with the Anglican Communion

Long-time member of the Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), Edward Yarnold, SJ, once formulated the principle that “if x is the number of years it takes to establish a schism, the number of years it takes to heal it seems to be in the order of $100x$.” Part of what makes the reconciliation of separated churches so complex is that it involves not only the resolution of the original points of dispute, but also requires both bridging important developments in the history of separation, and learning to walk together in the present context.

Growing together in unity inevitably involves being attentive to, and where appropriate, responding to internal developments in the ecclesial life of the dialogue partner. The considerable tensions within the Anglican Communion over the past three years, focused on questions of human sexuality and on structures of authority and decision-making, have been well publicized. The Anglican Communion has acted to address these tensions, and is itself in the midst of a discernment process not only about important moral questions and authority structures, but about the nature and parameters of the Anglican Communion.

Through this process of discernment, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Communion Office in London have sought to maintain close communication with their ecumenical dialogue partners, and in various ways, have looked for the positive assistance of their ecumenical partners, including the Catholic Church. Anglican leaders have expressed the Communion’s desire not to lose what has been gained through decades of intensive dialogue, and to keep in sight the constructive body of teaching found in ARCIC texts as they discern the future of the Anglican Communion. It is, nonetheless, a complex landscape in which to maintain and foster ecumenical relations, one which raises fundamental questions for both Anglicans and their dialogue partners: What does it mean to be a faithful ecumenical partner - faithful to Christ, who desires the unity of his disciples, and faithful to each other - in such a context? What role might ecumenical texts and agreements play in this context of discernment? What steps are open to us now, and when are we obliged to wait patiently for greater clarity before initiatives can be taken?

Rather than chronicling the numerous developments within the Anglican Communion over the past year which have had an impact on relations with the Catholic Church, the present article will focus on the November 2006 visit to Rome of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. The principal texts associated with the visit, from Pope Benedict, Archbishop Williams and Cardinal Kasper, address the above questions and provide a window into the state of Anglican-Catholic relations at the present moment.

Visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury

Soon after being installed as Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Williams had paid a brief visit to Pope John Paul II (in October, 2003), and was present at both the funeral of Pope John Paul and the inauguration of the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, but this was his first formal visit to the Holy See with the purpose of discussing and furthering relations between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion. It was timed in part to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the visit of then Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Michael Ramsey to Pope

Paul VI, in 1966, which led to the establishment of an international theological dialogue between Anglicans and Catholics. The Anglican Centre in Rome also celebrated its 40th anniversary during the course of the Archbishop's visit.

Archbishop Williams and Pope Benedict met on November 23rd, first for a private conversation, then for an exchange of messages and the signing of a Common Declaration; it was the 6th such declaration to be jointly signed by a Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury, and the first in ten years. Pope Benedict and Archbishop William then joined an extended delegation of Anglicans and Catholics in praying mid-day prayer together. During the course of his visit, the Archbishop also met with Cardinal Kasper and took part in meetings at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The visit also included several opportunities to join in prayer, including ecumenical Vespers celebrations at Santa Maria Sopra Minerva and San Bartolomeo. The themes addressed during the visit included thanksgiving for what has been achieved in Anglican-Catholic relations since the Second Vatican Council, addressing new developments within the Anglican Communion and their ecumenical repercussions, the need for continuing dialogue, and the practical steps which could be appropriately taken in the present context.

Forty years of dialogue: giving thanks

In his address to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Pope Benedict noted that there “is much in our relations over the past forty years for which we must give thanks”, including the encouraging work of ARCIC, the friendship and good relations which exist between Anglicans and Catholics in many places, and the improved relations which have allowed a shared witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the words of the Common Declaration, “we celebrate the good which has come from these four decades of dialogue. We are grateful to God for the gifts of grace which have accompanied them.” The various speeches and homilies of the visit brought into relief what Anglicans and Catholics hold in common regarding the foundations of Christian faith: a common faith in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; a common baptism into Christ; the Holy Scriptures; the early creeds of the Church; a shared inheritance of patristic writings and traditions of liturgy, theology, spirituality and mission; a shared tradition of saints and martyrs.

Speaking the truth in love: addressing recent developments

One of the benefits of ecumenical dialogue sustained over a long period is the ability to speak very frankly, yet in a spirit of friendship, about challenges to our ecumenical relationship. During the course of Archbishop Williams' recent visit to Rome, there was no attempt on anyone's part to avoid addressing the remaining differences between Anglicans and Catholics, nor to minimize the importance of decisions which the Anglican Communion is currently facing. In his address, Pope Benedict noted that Archbishop Williams had himself spoken openly “about the strains and difficulties besetting the Anglican Communion”. “Recent developments”, the Holy Father continued, “especially concerning the ordained ministry and certain moral teachings, have affected not only internal relations within the Anglican Communion but also relations between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church. We believe that these matters, which are presently under discussion within the Anglican Communion, are of vital importance to the preaching of the Gospel in its integrity,

and that your current discussions will shape the future of our relations.” Pope Benedict added that in the midst of these deliberations, “we accompany you with heartfelt prayer”.

For his part, Archbishop Williams noted that the path to unity “is not an easy one, and that disputes about how we apply the Gospel to the challenges thrown up by modern society can often obscure or even threaten the achievements of dialogue, common witness and service”. Indicating that “only a firm foundation of friendship in Christ” can enable honest dialogue and discernment of a way forward, he expressed to Pope Benedict his readiness “to hear and to understand the concerns which you will wish to share with me.” It is worth noting that in response to the decisions in the Anglican provinces in the United States and Canada which precipitated current tensions, the Anglican Communion has, through its official instruments, continued to affirm the traditional Christian teaching about marriage and sexuality.

Continuing dialogue needed

In their Common Declaration, after acknowledging the challenge to Anglican-Catholic relations represented by recent developments, Pope Benedict and Archbishop Williams state that it “is a matter of urgency” that in renewing our commitment to full visible unity, “we also commit ourselves to continuing dialogue to address the important issues involved in the emerging ecclesiological and ethical factors making that journey more difficult and arduous.” As Cardinal Kasper had noted already in 2003, “precisely when there are problems there is ever greater need of dialogue.” Accordingly, during the Archbishop’s visit, he and Cardinal Kasper welcomed the completion of the second phase of the work of the ARCIC, and discussed plans for the future of the dialogue between the two ecumenical partners. It was agreed to appoint a Preparatory Commission which would meet in 2007 to discuss the third phase of the theological dialogue.

At the ecumenical celebration at Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, Cardinal Kasper and Archbishop Williams each gave a brief homily, introducing helpful perspectives on past and present efforts at reconciliation through dialogue. Cardinal Kasper noted that while we have come to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in each other, we have also come to see each other’s wounds and weaknesses. For centuries, we were generally quick to judge each other’s weaknesses harshly. Over the past decades, however, “we have begun to learn - and let me hasten to say that this is a reciprocal learning - what it means to walk with each other amidst difficulties, to carry the burdens of the other.” That in itself is a way of witnessing to the world what is required for genuine reconciliation. In turn, Archbishop Williams, in the context of reflecting on ch. 4 of St Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians, cautioned against judging the success or failure of our theological dialogue or our relations by the world’s standards. St Paul tells us that we are to carry in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in us (2 Cor. 4:10). That provides us with a very different standard with which to judge success and failure. In any conversation between Christian communities, “the only real failure would be to lose sight of the cross of Christ”.

Next steps

At the outset, the question was raised about appropriate steps for strengthening relations between Anglicans and Catholics in the present context. In their Common Declaration, Pope

Benedict and Archbishop Williams identified a wide range of areas of witness and service which call for closer co-operation, including the pursuit of peace in the Holy Land and in other parts of the world marred by conflict, promoting respect for life from conception until natural death, outreach to the poor, care for the environment, engaging in inter-religious dialogue, and addressing the negative effects of materialism.

The Common Declaration also made reference to the forthcoming publication of an agreed statement of the International Anglican - Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM), a commission constituted principally of bishops. The statement, entitled *Growing Together in Unity and Mission: Building on 40 Years of Anglican - Roman Catholic Dialogue*, offers a synthesis of the agreements reached in the first two phases of ARCIC, then proposes practical steps which might be taken based on the level of agreement achieved. The commission felt strongly that even in a time of uncertainty, the mission given us by Christ obliges and compels us to deepen our fellowship in life and mission in ways which are responsibly open before us. Given the significantly different quality of relations between Anglicans and Catholics in different parts of the world, the text stresses the need for local discernment to determine what practical initiatives would be appropriate in each local or national setting. This text will be made public in the near future, along with a Catholic commentary, so that it can be studied and discussed by the Catholic and Anglican churches.

Conclusion

It is a time of great uncertainty within the Anglican Communion. Ecumenical relations are built on the recognition of a degree of shared faith, and when a dialogue partner is in the midst of a serious discernment process, when the nature of the relationship between the churches of the communion is under discussion, then ecumenical relations are going to be directly impacted. The past year has also seen the Church of England enter into a discernment process regarding whether it will join several other Anglican provinces in authorizing the ordination of women to the episcopate - a decision which would further complicate Anglican-Catholic relations. Amidst the current tensions and initial signs of fragmentation, there are also positive developments underway - notable among them, the preparation of an Anglican covenant which would state with some clarity what Anglicans believe and what binds together the Anglican provinces. Encouragement can also be taken from the Anglican Communion's continuing commitment, during their discernment process, to paying serious attention to what their dialogue partners are saying.

In mid-February, the Primates of the Anglican Communion will meet in Tanzania. It is the first full meeting of the Primates in two years, and will be an important testing of initiatives to strengthen the bonds between Anglican provinces. The next Lambeth Conference, bringing together the bishops of the Anglican Communion, is scheduled for July 2008. To a certain degree, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity finds itself in a 'wait and see' posture, while being receptive to appropriate ways of engaging in common witness and common service, and accompanying the Anglican discernment process - through prayer, but also through dialogue about matters at the heart of present discussions. In various contexts, Catholic leaders have expressed the hope that the Anglican Communion is able to strengthen its ecclesial bonds; and that as a communion, it upholds the long tradition of the Church on the points in dispute. As for the uncertainties of the present moment, those engaged in

Anglican-Catholic relations might make their own the prayer and words of John Henry Newman in his hymn 'Lead Kindly Light': "Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me."

-Donald Bolen

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