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Statement by
 The Most Reverend Edmond Lee Browning
 Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, USA
 Exchange of Correspondence between Pope John Paul, II
 The Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal
 Johannes Willebrands on
 The Admission of Women to Priestly Ordination
 June 30, 1986

The exchange of letters by Pope John Paul, II and the Archbishop of Canterbury, and by the Archbishop and Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, should be read as a mini-dialogue on the question of admitting women to priestly ordination.

The Pope quotes his predecessor Paul VI, who spoke of the ordination of women as introducing into the dialogue "an element of grave difficulty," even a "threat". The Archbishop says no one anticipates that the path toward full church unity will be without difficulties, and agrees that the difference on the issue is "grave". I believe it would be unfortunate to underestimate the gravity of this issue for the movement of convergence between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

Serious doctrinal reasons are put forward by the Archbishop and the Cardinal for and against priestly ordination of women. However, a correspondence of such limited length cannot explore the questions deeply, nor reflect all of our current experience. I therefore endorse the Archbishop's proposal of an extended joint study of these issues, using an augmented Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC).

Episcopalians will wish to express appreciation to the Archbishop for his reporting of the convictions and situation of Anglicans on this issue after consulting the twenty seven regional primates of the Anglican Communion. On a number of occasions already he has expressed the conviction, which is shared by some other Anglicans, that action should not be taken to ordain women to the priesthood until there is a wider consensus in our churches. A number of Anglican Provinces have already come to a decision on this issue. I would hope that all the churches of the Anglican Communion can continue an open consultation on such an important contemporary question through a process of the various provinces deciding in their synods on the basis of doctrinal reasons, sharing their decisions and thereby helping one another to decide. An example of this process is the recent meeting of the Anglican primates in Toronto where the Archbishop formed a working group to gather provincial responses.

As our churches move forward in consultations and dialogue, I as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church uphold two points which are not mutually exclusive. First, we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church, so we are committed to the ecumenical dialogue for the sake of koinonia or fellowship that should bind it together in the unity of faith. Second, the Episcopal Church has proceeded to the ordination of women on the basis of serious and convincing theological reasons which it is willing to share with other churches. We intend, not to depart from the traditional catholic doctrine of holy orders, but to expand and open it to the other half of the human race. Like all the authors of these letters I am confident that the Holy Spirit will show us the way forward.