



Lambeth Palace London SE1 7JU

11th December 1985

Your Holiness,

The Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church are fully committed to the quest for full ecclesial unity. No-one, however, anticipates that the path towards unity will be without difficulties. One such difficulty, I fully recognise, is the difference of thinking and action about the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood.

The receipt of your letter of December last year on this question therefore prompted me to confidential consultation with the Primates of the autonomous provinces of the Anglican Communion throughout the world. They also judged your letter to be of great importance and by various means themselves sought the counsel of their own Provinces. Accordingly it is only now that I am able to make a substantive reply to your letter in the light of the responses I have received from the different parts of the Anglican Communion.

Before all else I want to thank Your Holiness for the constructive and frank character of your letter. The question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood is a divisive matter not only between our Churches but also within them. It is surely a sign of both the seriousness and the maturity of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations that we can exchange letters on a subject surrounded by controversy. I read your letter as an expression of that responsibility in pastoral care for the unity of all God's people which is part of the office of the Bishop of Rome. You may be certain that I received your letter in the same spirit of brotherly love with which it was sent and also intend this reply to reflect that "speaking the truth in love" of which your letter spoke.

In this fraternal spirit I am bound to report that - although Anglican opinion is itself divided - those Churches which have admitted women to priestly ministry have done so for serious doctrinal reasons. I have therefore felt an obligation to explain this more fully in a letter to His Eminence Cardinal Jan Willebrands, President of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, whose recent letter to the Co-Chairman of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission now raises the discussion of the reconciliation of ministries to some prominence in the theological dialogue between our Churches. I fully realise what a serious obstacle the actual admission of women to the priesthood appears to place in the way of such a possibility.

I would therefore propose to Your Holiness the urgent need for a joint study of the question of the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood, especially in respect of its consequences for the mutual reconciliation of our Churches and the recognition of their ministries. Indeed such a study seems already implicit in the mandate of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission expressed in our Common Declaration at Canterbury of the 29th of May 1982.

Though the difficulty is grave, to face it together would, I suggest, give real substance to the hope expressed at the end of your letter. While neither of us can under-estimate the seriousness of this obstacle, I know that we are both convinced that our two Communions ought to maintain the mature trust in each other which has been built up over recent years. Because we have a grave responsibility to continue and intensify our co-operation and dialogue in everything which promotes our growth towards unity, there is a special obligation to tackle such a potentially serious difficulty. In this I believe our two communities will be sustained by their hope and confidence in the Holy Spirit, who alone can bring unity to fulfilment - a fulfilment we need to strive for without wearying and to receive in humility as his gift.

Your Holiness' Brother in Christ,

Archbishop of Canterbury

His Holiness Pope John Paul II.