

ARCIC II - CHURCH AND COMMUNION

(BIRMINGHAM SUB-COMMISSION 8 - 11 APRIL 1988)

I N T R O D U C T I O N

'Communion' is one of the most expressive words used in the New Testament in describing God's purpose in salvation: it comprehends our relationship both with God and with one another in Christ (e.g. 1 John 1:3, 1 Cor. 10:16-21). Moreover communion involves growth in those relationships, reaching its fulfilment finally when God becomes all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). Although the Greek word koinonia is not always used in the New Testament with precisely the same meaning (this is also true of its cognates), and is never used explicitly as a definition of the Church, the general idea of 'communion' is conveyed in many ways. Other words, expressions and images point to the same reality. Significantly koinonia was a thread running through all the statements of ARCIC-I's Final Report (vid. Introduction para.6) and was of fundamental importance to the agreement achieved. "It is the term that most aptly expresses the mystery underlying the various New Testament images of the church" (Introduction, para. 4). ARCIC-II's Statement on Salvation and the Church concluded with a section that elaborated the way in which "the doctrine of salvation is intimately associated with the doctrine of the Church which is the community of those reconciled with God and with each other" (Salvation and the Church para.25 cf. Final Report; para. 8).

It is our conviction that communion understood in this way is the heart and goal of the gospel. The community of the reconciled is entrusted as Christ's ambassador with a mission of reconciliation for the world. In so far as the Church is a true expression of this communion, it will fulfil this task.

Growing understanding of the nature of communion has been further enhanced by our increasingly shared experience of its reality. In this context of communion the difficulties that still divide us will be better discerned in their true perspective: only then may sufficient light be shed upon them to find a way forward. For this reason the outstanding difficulties between our two churches will best be resolved in the light of this perception.

It is clear, therefore, that communion embraces more than institutional relationships between churches or even eucharistic communion. It expresses the central concern of God for his whole creation, that through Christ all things should be reconciled to him (see Col. 1:19-20). It denotes indeed the fundamental nature of the Church, which is called to be the concrete manifestation of that profound unity. This becomes visible in a common faith, fellowship, love and mission.

I C O M M U N I O N

God's purpose is "to draw humanity into communion with himself and with one another, so as to share his life, the life of the Holy Trinity" (Salvation and the Church para 29) and thus reflect the mutual love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Human beings are created in order to live in communion with God and with one another and in accord with God's pattern of creation. In Christ God's purpose is to heal the effects of the disruption of this communion caused by sin, even "to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). This involves not only individuals but also alienated factions and communities.

All creation stems from the love of God, exists through that love and finds its fulfilment in it. The drama of humanity, as unfolded in scripture, is of the breakdown and renewal of communion. In Genesis Adam and Eve are created to find fulfilment in each other in communion with God. Their disobedience undermines their mutual relationship, ^(Ref:) causes them to hide from God and also disturbs their relationship with the natural order. The unfolding account in Genesis indicates that this is the way of all humanity. Nevertheless, in faithfulness to his eternal purpose, God continues to will the harmony and communion of his creation. The story of Babel illustrates the self-destructive character of attempts to build a community without God and the human inability to remain in harmony and communion apart from him. This estrangement is not limited to individuals. God's purpose of communion is re-affirmed in the call to Abraham and his descendants. God's covenant with his people through Moses establishes a special relationship of communion: "You shall be my own possession among all peoples: for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (Ex.19:5-6). The people's lack of fidelity to the God who called them, constantly denounced by the prophets, ruptures God's gift of communion, even leading to division of the kingdom and exile. Nevertheless, God's fidelity to his covenant remains constant. He promises repeatedly that his purpose of communion will be accomplished in spite of the failures of the chosen people. Reconciliation of the scattered people of God, of Judah and Israel together, will spring from a radical transformation within a new covenant. The nation will thus become fit to be God's servant: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Is.49:3 and 6). Then will God's purpose of communion be fulfilled (Is.11:1-9; Mic.4:1-4; Is.11:1-9; Is.25:2-8; Zech.2:10-13).

The apostolic community understood in the light of Pentecost that the promises given by God in his covenant were fulfilled in Christ. By the cross and in the Spirit of the risen Lord the barriers dividing humanity were broken down.

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Through faith with repentance, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, believers were drawn into communion with God and with one another. "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised, and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11). Christians thus enter into the salvation of the New Covenant. This salvation is far more than the restoration of a broken relationship. In Christ we are brought into the family of God and, as adopted children, share in his own communion with the Father. As in the case of the prodigal son, the welcome and honour we receive from the heavenly Father, so wholly undeserved, far exceed all expectation. Through the victory of the cross Christ who is our peace has also broken down all human divisions. The barriers of culture, class, sex and privilege are all overcome (Eph. 2:13-18; Gal. 3:27-29). So the New Testament may speak of the disciples as one flock, as the living stones of one temple, as the branches of one vine, as the members of one body, the body of Christ. Moreover, because our Saviour is the one in and through whom all things were created and reconciled, our proper relationship within the whole created order is re-affirmed.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit the victory of the Cross begins to be realised in the life and experience of the Christian Church. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel : in place of division "the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul and ... they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). The people embody this gift of communion between God and themselves: this is the mystery of the Church, "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (cf. 1 Peter 2:9, 10). By declaring the marvellous deeds of God the Church is in its life and preaching the sign and instrument of God for calling the whole of humanity into this communion. The death of Christ was for all humankind: the Church is that part of humanity which accepts through the Holy Spirit this call to become the new humanity.

The Church's vocation involves the renewal and recovery of our full human

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responsibility through communion with the living Christ. We are to share his commitment to the Father in the realisation of the gospel, and in his compassion for the world. Our assurance is that, having been in communion with Christ in his suffering, in the final resurrection we shall share in Christ's victory over all the powers of death and decay that disrupt communion. (cf. Phil. 3:10; Rom. 8:17) In the new heaven and new earth God will dwell with his people in perfect communion, making all things new (Rev. 21:1-5).

Communion is maintained by the confession of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). It is expressed in mutual compassion, intercession, practical care and the sharing of resources, and is celebrated in and sustained by the eucharist, where we all partake of the one cup and the one bread (1 Cor.10:16,17).

Since apostolic times, the Church has always included belief in its unity among its articles of faith (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:12f; Eph. 4:4f). Christians, therefore, can never acquiesce in the experience of disunity. Because there is only one Lord, God himself has given his Church one gospel, one faith, one baptism, one eucharist, and one ministry through which Christ continues to feed and guide his flock.

Communion has always needed to be defended as well as nurtured. From the beginning it has been affected by geographical, cultural and linguistic diversity. Differences in interpretation of scripture and in praxis could lead to schism. This was one reason for the role of the ordained ministry in the preservation of communion, exercised especially by the bishops who were "responsible for preserving and promoting the integrity of the koinonia to further the Church's response to the Lordship of Christ and its commitment to mission" (First Report , Authority 15, p.54). It was the task of such ministers to discern and express the Church's authoritative teaching of the

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apostolic faith and thus to foster communion within and between the local churches. Especially in the face of grave disagreements in teaching and praxis, the exchange of letters between bishops, as well as the growing practice of holding synods or councils (first local, later ecumenical), established the necessity for mutual consultation and common decision-making. However, even measures intended to promote unity have at times issued in further division.

Bishops and councils thus have a particular responsibility to maintain the communion and unity of the churches. They fulfil this task primarily by keeping the churches faithful to the authentic interpretation of the apostolic teaching. The Church confesses itself to be 'apostolic' because it knows that it is constituted by the faith of the apostles. In the Church of the fathers this link with the apostles was expressed by keeping lists of episcopal succession as well as by the careful transmission of the holy scriptures. Fundamental to the Church's self-understanding is this sense of communion through time.

In affirming its faith in the 'communion of saints', the Church declares its conviction that the eucharistic community on earth is itself a participation in a larger communion which includes the martyrs and all who have fallen asleep in Christ. Indeed it is already a foretaste of the community of the redeemed in the new Jerusalem.

This 'communion of saints' is experienced on earth in the communion between the churches. No local church can live in self-sufficient isolation. This is demonstrated by the participation of bishops of other churches in episcopal ordinations.

So fundamental is communion to the life of the Church that, even in times of

heresy or schism, the desire for unity between the churches has never wholly disappeared. In the case of our two traditions, there has always persisted a strong sense of the necessity of communion as inhering in the nature of the Church, though variously understood.

For Anglicans the existence during centuries of one Book of Common Prayer, the evolution of the Anglican 'Communion', the underlying purpose of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, and the Appeals for Unity issuing from Lambeth Conferences have been examples of this concern for communion. For Roman Catholics the concern for the universal Church has always been strong and has focused on the papacy as the centre of unity and mission. Vatican II and the initiatives of recent Bishops of Rome have enabled the Roman Catholic Church to play a significant part in the whole ecumenical enterprise. Accordingly, the purpose of this Commission is to help our two traditions to become fully and recognizably reconciled, by growing in the communion which already exists and by finding means to remove those obstacles which still stand in our way.

In agreement with the growing ecumenical consensus, we see 'communion' as the profound and all-embracing reality of a shared life in Christ, of which no one model or image is an adequate description. Through the Holy Spirit the Church is a communion of all Christian people, living in mutual submission and interdependence. This communion with one another stems from a shared communion with the Lord, himself in communion with his Father. The basic pattern of Christian communion is therefore to be seen in Jesus' own relation with his Father.

II UNITY AND DIVERSITY

Through sin the richness and variety of God's creation have become a source of estrangement, division and conflict. Amid humanity the Church is the community

which gratefully accepts God's gift of reconciliation in Christ, through which those divisions may be healed. Therefore the diversity, given by God for the enrichment of humanity, will not only be present in the Church, but need no longer be divisive. Moreover, it must be cherished and promoted, insofar as it contributes to the fullness of the Church's life and does not detract from its unity.

Because the Gospel is God's gift to humanity in every situation and culture and in every age, the Church cannot exist without this diversity. Such diversity may be realized even at the most profound level of the Church's life without, however, fragmenting its essential unity in Christ. It is manifested in the richness of various liturgies and forms of spirituality, differing disciplines and structures of authority, variety of theological approaches, and even different expressions of the same doctrine. All these differences are not merely juxtaposed; rather, they enrich one another. This diversity in unity is a witness that, thanks to the salvation given in Christ, diversity need not lead to division but may reflect the richness of creator in God's purpose for humanity.

The particular gifts that each member of the Church receives are not only for personal benefit, but also for the sake of the whole body of Christ. Therefore each Christian is called to contribute to the life and the service of the community. In a similar way the different Christian communities are called to share their diverse resources with each other, as is already apparent in the New Testament (see Acts 2:42-44; 2 Cor. 8:4). Those who have been charged with the ministry of oversight are responsible not only for guarding, co-ordinating and promoting the diverse gifts in each local community; they have a similar responsibility with regard to the authentic distinctive traditions of the churches.

The Church has always confessed its catholicity. The Gospel is to be proclaimed to all nations until the end of the world. In every age and in every place the Church is called to be the communion in Jesus Christ of all who come to him, with all the gifts and graces with which God has endowed them. Catholicity also implies that in the Church, by grace, there is to be a place for all the diverse riches God has given to humanity. Amid all the diversity of tradition and culture the Church's unity and coherence are maintained by the common confession of the one apostolic faith.

This apostolic faith includes belief in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Although diversity will, and should, always be found within the Church, it becomes intolerable when it causes division. While the quest for unity must not issue in the imposition of uniformity, neither can pluriformity be allowed to produce fragmentation in the Church. Maintaining the Church's unity takes precedence over the fostering of its diversity. This was exemplified in the decisions reached at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), as also in the apostle Paul's concern not to injure the weaker brother (Romans 15:1,2). It is primarily for unity that we must strive and, on occasions, make sacrifices.

The communion of the Church is threatened when the truth of the faith is denied. The apostolic faith, recorded in the scriptures, summarised in the creeds and attested by the Church fathers, must remain normative. When disbelief in its essentials or grave distortion of its content are propounded, such doctrinal disagreement becomes unacceptable. Hence the binding affirmations of the early councils. However, it is crucial to distinguish between those things which are necessary and sufficient in order to remain faithful to the truth of the gospel and those matters which do not fall into this category. It is also necessary to differentiate between the truth of doctrine and the variety of its theological expression. Much of the Church's

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difficulty lies in discerning where these lines of distinction are to be drawn.

When the Church becomes indifferent to injustice in the world, either colluding with exploitation and oppression or being itself involved, communion is threatened. Justice is fundamental to the pattern of God's creation and also in the new creation in Christ Jesus. The Old Testament prophets constantly condemned injustice. According to the teaching of Jesus the failure to respond to the consequences of injustice will be a decisive factor in the final judgment (Matthew 25). There must be respect for the poor and no obsequiousness to the rich (James 2). The Church has the responsibility to be a sign and instrument of justice in the world, as well as a prophetic voice when injustice occurs.

But communion is also threatened by other kinds of behaviour that contradict the love of Christ. These too can undermine the reality of the Church as God's people drawn together by the Holy Spirit to live in communion. How can individual Christians properly meet together at the same eucharist, around the same table, and partake of the same bread when they are not in love and charity with one another?

It is in the eucharist especially that the Church manifests its communion. However, the truth, justice or love of Christ may be denied to such an extent that it becomes impossible for churches to celebrate the eucharist together with integrity and honesty.

Here precisely the Church requires a ministry of oversight, concerned to protect and promote communion, in order to discern when the limits of diversity have been over-reached and to rectify what has become disruptive. The Church cannot fulfil its mission without every effort being made to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

I I I S I G N S O F C O M M U N I O N

Full ecclesial communion, while safeguarding proper diversity, is recognizable by certain visible signs. It is important for our churches, as they grow towards such ecclesial communion, to discover the measure of fundamental accord that already exists between us. Some forms of diversity, far from detracting from communion, are an essential feature of it and demonstrate its vitality. The visible evidence of communion is not a rigid uniformity. At the same time it is impossible to speak only of an invisible spiritual unity as the fulfilment of Christ's will for his Church. Shared discipleship must manifest itself in a discernible manner. To the life of grace belong essential elements, which may be expressed in diverse ways. There will be a common commitment to the apostolic faith, shared prayer and sacramental life and involvement in the mission of the Church. It is in this realm of discipleship that the quality of the Church's spiritual life can best be discerned.

However, ever since the apostolic age, institutional church structures have been recognized as necessary for fostering discipleship, guarding the flock and maintaining communion. Ministerial authority and oversight are indispensable lest the Church betray its apostolic and catholic nature and thereby forfeit its visible communion. Although the institutional structures of the Church cannot guarantee the constant fidelity of the disciples, neither can the disciples dispense with them. In submission to Jesus Christ as Lord, both the spiritual and the institutional are essential to the fulness of communion in the life of grace.

When the quality of Christian discipleship has been at a low ebb, the Church

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has been especially vulnerable to schism. Schism is more than mere institutional severance; it is also the consequence of spiritual decay and estrangement. Yet even when schisms have occurred, there are still evidences of the fruit and gifts of the Spirit on both sides of the divide. These show that the fundamental unity of the Spirit has not been lost. Visible signs of Christian discipleship confirm that a measure of fundamental accord and true communion still persists. But the rupture between the churches, as between the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions, is not thereby healed. The scandal of disunity remains. Mutual recognition of ministries is still lacking, and therefore also a shared eucharistic life. There is, in consequence, an inability mutually to recognize, affirm and welcome each other's communities and members. Because there is no institutional structural bond, there exists no adequate mode of shared decision-making in matters of faith, conduct and mission. Yet even at these structural levels the bond of communion in Christ has not been wholly severed.

The visible signs of full ecclesial communion are various in kind. Some are such that, by them, different churches or communities are able to recognize one another as united in a common discipleship. Others are sacramental in character. Still others are institutional or canonical. All are indispensable for the manifestation of full ecclesial communion.

All the visible signs of full ecclesial communion are derived from and subordinate to the common confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. Among these visible signs of communion between churches, the following are essential.

1. They acknowledge each other as professing and teaching the one apostolic faith, revealed in the scriptures, set forth in the creeds, and attested by the common tradition of the fathers. In particular they confess a common faith in the Holy Trinity, and in Jesus Christ, truly divine and

truly human.

2. They confess and practise one baptism with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
3. They share a common concern for the poor and the powerless, and for justice and peace on earth.
4. They support and assist one another, bearing each other's burdens, both material and spiritual.
5. They recognize each other as faithful to the mission which Jesus Christ entrusted to his Church.
6. They acknowledge one another as sharing the same basic moral values, derived from the belief that humanity is created in the image of God.
7. They are so united in faith and life that they are able to pray together in the Holy Spirit and through the Lord Jesus Christ to the one God and Father of all.
8. They recognize each other's members as true members of Christ.
9. They recognize each other's ministers as true ministers of Christ, and each other as true churches of Christ, without qualification.
10. They acknowledge common organs of authority as given by God to his Church, and as able to speak for all and to all in matters of faith and conduct.
11. They together acknowledge a common ministry of oversight, both collegial

and primatial in character, given to the churches by God in service of their communion and unity.

12. Their full communion in faith and life is sacramentally expressed in the common celebration of the eucharist.

Such, in outline, are the chief signs by which full ecclesial communion may be recognized. However, our fullest communion with God and with other human beings will be realized only in the kingdom of heaven. Within the pilgrim Church on earth, even when it enjoys full ecclesial communion, Christians will be obliged to seek ever deeper communion with God and with one another, as well as the healing of those breaches of communion which may open up between them. But such communion can be only a provisional approximation to that which will be granted when together with all the saints we shall see God face to face, and when all need for sacramental signs of God's presence to us will have ceased.

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