




To The Most Reverend Robert Runcie
Archbishop of Canterbury

I acknowledge with gratitude the letter which you sent to me at the close of the twelfth Lambeth Conference last August. Your thoughtfulness in informing me about the proceedings of the Conference is much appreciated. I see in this gracious gesture a further indication of the trust that exists between us and of the strong bond of communion by which we are already united.

In responding to your communication, I would first of all acknowledge the signs of openness to fuller communion with the Catholic Church which were evident at several points in the Conference, not least in your opening address and in the resolutions on the Final Report of ARCIC-1. At the same time, I must express my concern in respect of those developments at Lambeth which seem to have placed new obstacles in the way of reconciliation between Catholics and Anglicans. The Lambeth Conference's treatment of the question of women's ordination has created a new and perplexing situation for the members of the Second Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission to whom, in 1982, we gave the mandate of studying "all that hinders the mutual recognition of the ministries of our Communion". The ordination of women to the priesthood in some provinces of the Anglican Communion, together with the recognition of the right of individual provinces to proceed with the ordination of women to the episcopacy, appears to preempt this study and effectively block the path to the mutual recognition of ministries.




The Catholic Church, like the Orthodox Church and the Ancient Oriental Churches, is firmly opposed to this development, viewing it as a break with Tradition of a kind we have no competence to authorize. It would seem that the discussion of women's ordination in the Anglican Communion has not taken sufficiently into account the ecumenical and ecclesiological dimensions of the question. Since the Anglican Communion is in dialogue with the Catholic Church - as it is with the Orthodox Church and the Ancient Oriental Churches - it is urgent that this aspect be given much greater attention in order to prevent a serious erosion of the degree of communion between us.

I am aware that no final decision on the controversial question of women's ordination has been taken as far as the Church of England is concerned. I likewise understand the delicate nature of your own position, given the autonomy of each of the provinces that make up the Anglican Communion, as well as your anxiety over a possible split within that Communion. Since, however, as Archbishop of Canterbury you also represent the Anglican Communion in its relations with the Catholic Church, a highly problematic situation could certainly arise for those provinces opposed to women's ordination if there were women priests in the Church of England. In addressing Your Grace so directly on this matter, I would stress that my motivation is simply to serve the quest for unity to which our predecessors Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey committed themselves in 1966: a commitment which you and I renewed during my visit to Canterbury in 1982.

Assuring you of my prayers as we persevere in the search for that unity willed by the Lord for all his disciples, I renew my warm fraternal greetings in our Saviour Jesus Christ, the Eternal High Priest.

From the Vatican, 8th December 1988



Joannes Paulus PP II