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Life in Christ: Considerations for Synod group discussion

A note by the Archbishop of Canterbury

1. The ARCIC report *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church* marks a highly significant recognition that ethical issues are not separate—let alone secondary—matters in the dialogue between churches. If we are serious in our reading of the Biblical witness, what we say about human behaviour has to be rooted in our basic theological understanding of God's purpose for human persons; which is to say that it must be inseparable from our understanding of both creation and redemption and from our doctrine of the Church. Whatever reservations there may be about the detail of this report, its most important contribution was—and still is—to remind us of this connection. Christian ethics is about the character of the Body of Christ. Thus the introductory material on the biblical understanding of the human person is of key significance to reading the whole of the report. We are made to give glory to God and saved so that this glory may be fully realised in creation (§9). The glory of God is the radiance of his nature, and if that nature is the selfless love of the Holy Trinity, our participation in his glory is our growth into selfless love and away from individualistic concepts of liberty which privilege the solitary human will.

2. The report thus embodies some of the insights that resulted from the major shift in the understanding of moral theology and theological ethics that took place in the seventies and eighties, in which the emphasis moved from a narrow focus on decisions and crises towards a deeper grasp of the importance of Christian character. This is affirmed as part of the common heritage of Anglicans and Roman Catholics, as heirs together of both biblical and pre-modern theological concerns; and it is seen as connected to a recovery of the unity between moral and spiritual theology, which had been dangerously divided in post-Reformation Catholic thought (§44), and were sometimes awkwardly handled in a Protestant theology uncomfortable with systematic reflection on the nature of holiness (as opposed to obedience or duty towards God).

3. There is a rather perfunctory air about the report's treatment of Anglican moral theology, as several commentators have noted. It is not only that Anglican theology developed a quite sophisticated tradition of casuistry (§45): in addition to this essentially pastoral element (exemplified by writers like Jeremy Taylor), there was much discussion of the concept of the laws of God, above all in Richard Hooker, and of the foundations of ethical coherence in the very concept of a creator, as in Bishop Joseph Butler's sermons and systematic works. Given that Butler is arguably the most important moral thinker of Anglican history (and someone who had a substantial influence on John Henry Newman) it is strange to find no mention of him and of the world of reflection he represented. This lack of historical perspective explains (though it does not justify) the implication that notions of absolute moral law are somehow foreign to the Anglican ethos. Section 52 begs a number of serious questions and also seems to assume that Anglicans do not understand the principles of canon law. The quantity of work on all these issues in modern Anglican theology, from Kenneth Kirk to Gordon Dunstan to Norman Doe, tells decisively against any such assumption.

4. It is understandable that there should be a certain concentration on particular issues (divorce and contraception) on which discipline varies between the two communions. But this tends to weaken the basic affirmations about the need to focus on character rather than the rightness

or wrongness of this or that choice. It also brackets out the undeniable fact that these specific issues are now the subject of fierce debate within the Roman Catholic Church, despite the unchanging and authoritative rulings of the magisterium. The question of the concrete authority of this magisterium in the context of a changing environment needs to be discussed in some forum; though to grant this is not to say that the very idea of a magisterium is empty or that authority in moral matters is not to be looked for. It is simply to ask for a more careful and nuanced account of how moral authority actually operates in the modern Church (that is, in any modern ecclesial community).

5. The focus on these issues also has the unhappy effect of reinforcing the stereotype that the only serious questions and the only serious disagreements are about 'personal' or sexual morality. The modern Catholic tradition of public reflection on the common good is not given adequate attention – and the same is broadly true of Anglican social thinking. A more contemporary study might well look at both the contrasts and the overlaps between the 'common good' discourse and the Anglican legacy of addressing controversial public questions by way of 'middle axioms', principles supposed to be accessible to believers and unbelievers alike.

6. Since 1994, of course, debate about personal and sexual morality has become more bitter and polarised, especially in the context of the discussion of same-sex relationships, even though the Anglican Communion has not altered its general stance (and even the Episcopal Church has never made a clear moral declaration of new doctrine or discipline, but has allowed events and specific crises to steer the province towards a new position). But the other moral questions whose absence now seems odd include far wider and arguably deeper matters – above all the ecological challenge and, most recently, the ethics of global finance, as well as the complexities of bioethics. In the light of the way public discussion has moved in recent years, it may be that any new look at this whole territory would need to concentrate on precisely the basic principles of *Life in Christ* from a slightly different angle. If the Church's 'moral principles' are inseparable from its character as Christ's Body, as a community existing essentially in relation to the gift and grace of Jesus and his Spirit, we all need to think harder about how the distinctiveness of the Church is articulated in respect of society in general – not so as to dig some great gulf between Church and society but so as to clarify how and why the Church claims to offer human society a promise that it could not achieve out of its own resources. For this generation, the issues of ethics are bound up more profoundly with the need to understand secularisation in an adequately theological way. *Life in Christ* may have dated, but it still prompts some vital questions for us as we seek to deal with this challenge to all the churches.

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