Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission: *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church*

Briefing paper for General Synod

1. The report *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church* appeared in 1994 and therefore belongs to the second phase of the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission. Apart from *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (which is due to be considered by the College of Bishops in September with a view to subsequent consideration by the Synod), it is the last report of ARCIC II to come before the Synod, as requested in the amended Synod motion on the IARCCUM report *Growing Together in Unity and Mission* in February 2008.

2. *Life in Christ* is the only ARCIC report to deal with personal morals and is unique among ecumenical agreed statements in tackling this area. Although the report is 15 years old and has certain weaknesses (see below), as the only document of its type it remains relevant for the churches and for the relationships between them. In 1993, between the drafting of the report and its publication, Pope John Paul II issued his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* ('The Splendour of Truth'), which constitutes a watershed in modern moral theology.

3. ARCIC was set up to examine the differences that were perceived as contributing to the ongoing separation between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church and to work towards 'the restoration of full communion'. *Life in Christ* was no exception: its mandate reflected 'the widespread belief that Anglicans and Roman Catholics are as much, if not more, divided on questions of morals as on questions of doctrine' (Preface). The thrust of the report is to challenge that common perception.

4. The starting point of *Life in Christ* is what the co-chairs of the commission describe as 'the profound and true conviction that authentic Christian unity is as much a matter of life as of faith', for 'those who share one faith in Christ will share one life in Christ' (Preface). The body of the report repeats this point: 'In the past, ecumenical dialogue has concentrated on matters of doctrine ... However, the gospel we proclaim cannot be divorced from the life we live. Questions of doctrine and of morals are closely interconnected, and differences in the one area may reflect differences in the other' (#2).

5. What stands out in this report is the affirmation of shared ethical principles, understandings and values, even where there is disagreement on particular moral issues. 'Careful consideration has persuaded the commission that, despite existing disagreement in certain areas of practical and pastoral judgment, Anglicans and Roman Catholics derive from the scriptures and Tradition the same controlling vision of the nature and destiny of humanity and share the same fundamental moral values' (#1).

6. The theological framework offered by *Life in Christ*, which underpins its discussion of specific issues, is a vision of persons created in the image of God for communion with God and with one another, reflecting God's character in their lives and behaviour and working for the common good (#4-11). It is a description that centres on character rather than actions: 'The true goal of the moral life is the flourishing and fulfilment of that *humanity* for which all men and women have been created. The fundamental moral question, therefore, is not "What ought we to do?", but "What kind of persons are we called to become?"' (#6).

7. The moral teaching of the Christian Church, according to the commission, is both coherent and

evolving; it seeks to respond to fresh circumstances: ‘At its deepest level, the response of the church to the offer of new life in Christ possesses an unchanging identity from age to age and place to place. In its particular teachings, however, it takes account of changing circumstances and needs, and in situations of unusual ambiguity and perplexity it seeks to combine new insight and discernment with an underlying continuity and consistency’ (#10). Moral discernment means being in tune with the mind of Christ. A process of prayerful reflection, learning and openness to new insights in the light of circumstances is the path to discerning the mind of Christ, especially where new and complex moral and pastoral problems are concerned (#24).

8. The report recognises the role of the *consensus fidelium* (consensus of the faithful) in homing in on the truth. ‘The fidelity of the church to the mind of Christ involves a continuing process of of listening, learning, reflecting and teaching’ in which every member of the Church has a part to play in which they must be guided by conscience. ‘Conscience is informed by, and informs, the tradition and teaching of the community. Learning and teaching are a shared discipline, in which the faithful seek to discover together what obedience to the gospel of grace and the law of love entails amidst the moral implications of the gospel which calls for continuing discernment, constant repentance, and “renewal of the mind” (Romans 12:2)’ (#29). The process of discerning the mind of Christ ‘unfolds through the formation of a character, individual and communal, that reflects the likeness of Christ and embodies the virtues of a true humanity’ (#31). ‘Holding in mind the teaching they have received, drawing upon their own experience, and exploring the particularities of the issue that confronts them, they have then to decide what action to take in these circumstances and on this occasion’ (#32).

9. The report identifies ‘the two moral issues on which the Anglican and Roman Catholic Communions have expressed official disagreement’ as first, ‘the marriage of a divorced person during the lifetime of a former partner’, and second, ‘the permissible methods of controlling conception’ (#54). As regards the latter, it states: ‘Both our traditions agree that procreation is one of the divinely intended “goods” of the institution of marriage. A deliberate decision, therefore, without justifiable reason, to exclude procreation from a marriage is a rejection of this good and a contradiction of the nature of marriage itself’ (#78).

10. The report touches briefly on the questions of termination of pregnancy and homosexuality, stating: ‘the disagreements between us are not on the level of fundamental moral values, but on their implementation in practical judgements’ (#84). For example, as regards abortion, it states: ‘Anglicans and Roman Catholics ... are at one in their recognition of the sanctity, and right to life, of all human persons, and they share an abhorrence of the growing practice in many countries of abortion on grounds of mere convenience’ (#85).

11. In its discussion of human sexuality, ARCIC attempts, where possible, to state things positively. For example, this is how it affirms marriage: ‘The integration of sexual instincts and affections into a lifelong relationship of married love and loyalty constitutes a uniquely significant form of human flourishing and fulfilment’ (#9). Marriage and the family are ‘institutions divinely appointed for human well-being and happiness’ (#58).

12. *Life in Christ* has little to say about the question of same-sex unions that have proved divisive within and between the churches in recent years, but it rejects any suggestion of a major divergence between Anglican and Roman Catholic approaches on this matter. It affirms a whole series of common principles: all persons are made in the divine image; the value of friendship and companionship; lifelong marriage as the normative context for sexuality; and the non-equivalence of marriage and homosexual relations in terms of the right ordering and use of sexuality. It suggests that Anglicans ‘could agree’ with Roman Catholics that homosexual activity is disordered in terms of God's intention for humankind, but adds that ‘there may well

be differences among them in the consequent moral and pastoral advice they would think it right to offer to those seeking their counsel and direction' (#87).

13. Although the central claim of *Life in Christ* – that Anglicans and Roman Catholics share a common ethical heritage and vision and a series of key moral principles – is not affected by the passing of time, today's social and moral context is significantly different. Ethical challenges that were already emerging when ARCIC did its work (in medical, biological, environmental and economic ethics and the ideology of human rights) are now pressing.

14. *Life in Christ* was produced during a period of transition in the make up of ARCIC and some see traces of discontinuity and incompleteness in the report. Certainly there are deficiencies in the presentation of the Anglican moral tradition: #45 is woefully thin, with no reference to the natural law tradition in Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, for example, from the earlier period, or to such twentieth-century moral theologians as Kenneth Kirk and Robert Mortimer. The Anglican tradition of social ethics, represented particularly by William Temple and Ronald Preston in the same period also goes unmentioned.

15. It is also a serious fault in the report that it suggests that Anglicans do not recognise any absolute moral claims ('the absoluteness of some demands of the moral law') in the way that Roman Catholics do – though it is acknowledged that Anglicans uphold 'ultimate' or fundamental moral values') (#52). One would also expect to find some clarification of the role of conscience at this point.

16. While the report emphasises the common heritage of the two communions for 1,500 years, it points out that in the sixteenth century the movement for reform could no longer be contained within a single communion. 'It is in this context of broken communion and diverging histories that the existing differences between Anglicans and Roman Catholics on matters of morality must be located if they are to be rightly understood' (#36). 'Painful and perplexing as they are, they do not reveal a fundamental divergence in our understanding of the moral implications of the Gospel' (#101).

17. *Life in Christ* sits within the trajectory of constructive work on 'the restoration of full communion' between the Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church that was re-affirmed by Archbishop Robert Runcie and Pope John Paul II in their Common Declaration in Canterbury Cathedral in 1982 (Preface). The restoration of communion is linked to the resolution of disagreements: 'seeking a resolution of our disagreements is part of the process of growing together towards full communion ... [But] only as closer communion leads to deeper understanding and trust can we hope for a resolution of our disagreements' (#99).

18. As a step towards this twofold goal, ARCIC proposes that 'instruments of co-operation' should be established between the two Communions, especially at the national and regional levels, to engage with the serious moral issues confronting humanity today. Working together on moral issues, it suggests, would be 'a practical way of expressing the communion we already enjoy, [and] of moving towards full communion'. At the same time, 'moving towards shared witness would contribute significantly to the mission of the Church and allow the light of the Gospel to shine more fully upon the moral perplexities of human existence in today's world' (#103-104). IARCCUM, which did not exist when *Life in Christ* was produced, offers a suitable vehicle for this joint work. The IARCCUM agreed statement *Growing Together in Unity and Mission* endorsed the central contention of *Life in Christ* and devoted the whole of section 8 ('Discipleship and Holiness') to this area. We believe that Anglicans would still welcome this initiative.