Christian Ethics in the Ecumenical Dialogue 2011.12.07
Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission II and Recent Papal Teaching
Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the United States
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1. Our Churches have long recognized the need for serious engagement with Christian ethics as an important component of our endeavor to restore full ecclesial communion. The Second Vatican Council had suggested that 'on the common basis of the Gospel, dialogue can lead to a more profound understanding on both sides' (*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 23). Although ecclesiological and other doctrinal issues too priority in the various bilateral dialogues initiated after the Council, including the international and national Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogues, it became increasingly clear that ecumenical dialogue on ethics could not be long postponed.

   In 1979, addressing an ecumenical assembly of church leaders toward the close of his first U.S. visit as pope, John Paul II spoke of 'deep division which still exists over moral and ethical matters', and declared: 'The moral life and the life of faith are so deeply united that it is impossible to divide them' (7 Oct. 1979, Trinity College, Washington D.C.). During the next decade, the perception grew that progress toward Christian unity might now be hampered by differences over current moral issues even more than the doctrinal differences inherited from the Reformation era.

2. That discouraging perception has now been challenged in an agreed statement on morals published by the Second Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II), entitled *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church* (LC) (1994). Drawing upon the Commission's previous agreed statement, *Church as Communion* (1991), the present statement on morals emphasizes that the communion to which we are all called involves responsibilities to God, to society, and to the world we inhabit. From the outset, *Life in Christ* affirms that Anglicans and Roman Catholics 'share the same fundamental moral values' (LC, no. 1). The opening chapters set forth the shared vision and common heritage of our two Churches as regards the meaning of Christian life (nos. 4-35). Differences between us in the articulation of this moral vision – for example, concerning the respective roles of personal conscience, ecclesia tradition, and magisterial teaching in Christian moral formation- are seen and presented as a matter of varying emphasis rather than substantive disagreement (nos. 43-53).

   In addressing certain specific moral issues where some measure of real disagreement is evident, *Life in Christ* endeavors to situate these differences within the context of broader areas of basic agreement between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. Regarding divorce and remarriage, and also contraception, the divergent official positions of our two Churches are seen as differences over detailed moral conclusions which should not obscure our fundamental agreement on the nature of marriage as a permanent covenant open to procreation (nos. 64-80). Our differing approaches to abortion in certain difficult cases are seen as expressing diverse understandings of the status of absolute moral prohibitions in ethical discourse, a diversity which leaves intact our common reverence for the sacredness of all human life (nos. 85-86). As regards to homosexuality, *Life in Christ* acknowledges differences between Anglican and Roman Catholic pastoral practices but does not view these differences as compromising a shared appreciation of the marriage covenant as 'the normative context for a fully sexual relationship' (no. 87).

According to *Life in Christ*, therefore, it would appear that our differences concerning morals amount to relatively narrow disagreements over secondary issues, or to variations of emphasis which involved no real disagreement at all, or to matters of practice which are not seen to present a significant challenge to moral teaching. *Life in Christ* claims that the importance of all such differences has been exaggerated by the very fact of our broken communion, which tempts us to exalt our differences into church-dividing issues (nos. 53, 89). In the perspective of *Life of Christ*, none of our differences regarding morals is a valid warrant for our Churches to remain separated. On the contrary, strengthening our communion offers the best hope for resolving our outstanding moral differences and bearing more effective common witness to our shared Gospel values (no. 88).

3. The optimistic thesis of *Life in Christ* appears to be significantly challenged, in its turn, by the papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (VS), which was published only months earlier (5 Oct. 1993). We note with regret that these two documents were prepared independently of each other, and we find our Churches challenged to be more collaborative in the future. Still, now we must take account of important contrasts in outlook between the two documents and the likely implication of these contrasts for the eventual assessment of *Life in Christ* by the papal magisterium.

   Whereas *Life in Christ* sees the fundamental moral question as 'What kind of persons are we called to become?', rather than 'What ought we to do?' (LC, no. 6), *Veritatis Splendor* is mainly concerned with 'What must we do?' This divergence on the primary ground of ethics – in character or in behavior – has long standing in the Christian tradition overall, and indeed it remains currently a focus of much lively discussion. Furthermore, other differences in approach between *Life in Christ* and *Veritatis Splendor* are also significant.

   Veritatis Splendor is intended as a magisterial directive specifically for Roman Catholics, rather than as a contribution to ecumenical dialogue (which is the intent of *Life in Christ*). *Veritatis Splendor* bases its moral vision primarily on the concept of divine law, rather than the relationship-responsibility concept which governs *Life in Christ*. By contrast with ARCIC's acceptance of a degree of ethical diversity as compatible with healthy ecclesial communion, it is a major objective of the papal encyclical to reprove the growth of such diversity among Roman Catholics as inimical to authentic communion (VS, no. 113). Finally, while *Life in Christ* advocates closer ecumenical dialogue as a preferred remedy for moral confusion, in *Veritatis Splendor* the major remedy indicated is the firmer exercise of papal and episcopal authority (VS, nos. 1141-116).

   Some of the above contrasts between *Life in Christ* and *Veritatis Splendor* may very well be seen as matters of divergent emphases dictated by different specific objectives. For example, the concentration in *Veritatis Splendor* on the question, 'What must we do?' can be understood in terms of the pope's special concern to address current internal Roman Catholic controversies about how to determine moral rectitude in human actions; and this need not be taken as negating ARCIC's attribution of fundamental primacy to the question, 'What kind of persons are we called to become?' Likewise, the encyclical's preference for the 'divine law' model in articulating its moral vision could well be based on the special aptitude of that particular model for asserting absolute principles governing specific human actions.

This preference need no imply a devaluing of other moral models highlighted in *Life in Christ*.

Other points of contrast are more formidable, however. As indicated above, the two documents appear to take incompatible positions concerning the impact of ethical diversity on ecclesial communion and concerning the appropriate role of ecclesiastical authority in dealing with such diversity. More specifically, ARCIC's suggestion that differing Anglican and Roman Catholic views on 'absolute moral prohibitions' are not of central importance seems hardly reconcilable with the major concern of *Veritatis Splendor* – reiterated, in part, in the subsequent encyclical *Evangelium Vitæ* (EV) (25 March 1995) – to underline the importance of such absolute prohibitions particularly as regards to issues involving human life, sexuality, and marriage (VS, nos. 80-83; EV, no. 62). Nor does ARCIC's suggestion appear congruent with the intense debate among Roman Catholics themselves about the status of absolute prohibitions and about the authoritative force of various papal statements.

4. It is the view of ARC-USA that, in light of the difficulties noted above, certain conclusions of ARCIC II as presented or suggested in *Life in Christ* stand in need of further study and refinement, so as to secure the possibility of fruitful ecumenical dialogue in relation to current authoritative Roman Catholic teaching. More attention must be given particularly to: (1) the significance of divergent Anglican and Roman Catholic positions on absolute moral prohibitions regarding specific categories of human action; (2) the contemporary influence of theological, geographical, and cultural diversity on the formulation of Anglican doctrines concerning moral questions, by contrast with the universal teaching that characterizes the Roman Catholic magisterium in such matters, and (3) the role of ecclesiastical authority in shaping the formation of moral judgments of individual Christians and by the whole Church.

   The experience of our two Churches in the United States indicates further that the specific moral issues highlighted in *Life in Christ* are considerably more conflictual – both within each of our Churches and between us – than ARCIC appears to have recognized. Even if basic areas of agreement exist as regards the sacredness of human life, the nature of marriage, and the meaning of human sexuality, our very diverse specifications and practical applications of these general principles cannot be regarded as non-essential in moral discourse, and indeed profoundly affect the extent and quality of communion. The sometimes sharply divergent specific teachings and practices of our Churches regarding divorce, contraception, abortion, and homosexuality are actually a frequently given reason why Roman Catholic and Episcopalian Christians leave on Church and enter the other.

   ARC-USA welcomes and commends *Life in Christ* as a ground-breaking exploration of the ethical dimension of Christian communion. We affirm, with *Life in Christ*, that the best way to deal constructively with the differences that divide us lies in closer consultation and collaboration. At the same time, this collaborative process requires that our conflicting positions on vital issues be acknowledged openly in all their seriousness, and engaged resolutely and wisely.