

Roma, 7th Aprile 1978

Prot.N. 1169/78

The Rt.Rev. John W.A. Howe, M.A. B.D.  
Secretary General  
Anglican Consultative Council  
32 Eccleston Street  
London SW1W 9PY.

Dear Bishop Howe,

By this time you will have had opportunity to reflect on the document produced by the Anglican-Roman Catholic group which met at Versailles to discuss the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood on the lines first proposed in our informal talks here in Rome.

I have been able both to study the document myself and to discuss it with Cardinal Willebrands and with those members of the Secretariat staff who were present at the consultation.

The group was right to judge it necessary to 'pose the problem in its clearest form' (para.5) and it seems that in the paragraphs preceding this one members have lived up to that intention. But I share with Cardinal Willebrands a grave doubt whether the same can be said of paragraph 6. One would not wish to question the Anglican 'conviction' which is spoken of here, but it seems an unhappy formulation to set it beside a reference to the Roman declaration which appears to be aimed at reducing the latter's weight. The Versailles document has already said in paragraph 2 that "The Roman Catholic Church believes that she has not the right to change the tradition 'unbroken throughout the history of the church, universal in the East and in the West', and considered to conform to God's plan for his Church", and the mere absence from the recent declaration of a technical term should not be used to suggest that this belief is somehow more of a provisional matter than the Anglican 'conviction' referred to and to the decisions which have been based upon it.

It appears that several Anglican sources were quoted without dissent during the consultation suggesting that these decisions are not irreversible and may be subject to the test of time, but this is in no way reflected in the text of the report.

I also share the Cardinal's view that the defective formulation of para 6 casts an unfortunate ambiguity over the following paragraph 7.

I realise that this question still remains a grave obstacle to the full unity. Nevertheless I would certainly

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want to identify myself with the hopeful spirit which runs through the document and is most explicit in the last paragraph. This is in harmony with the Holy Father's letters to the Archbishop and with the common declaration of last year. But I know we are both agreed that this hope rests on mutual confidence and candor, and I do not think that paragraph 6 in its present form contributes to those conditions. For this reason I should not feel able to cooperate in even a limited circulation of the document.

I would like to close this letter with the expression of my hope that our dialogue and cooperation will continue to grow and to deepen.

With warmest personal regards and best wishes of joy and peace in the Risen Christ.

yours sincerely,

  
+ Ramon Torrella  
Vice-President.