

Preliminary Reflections on the Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*

From the Anglican-Roman Catholic Bishops' Dialogue of Canada

1. The Invitation to “Patient and Fraternal Dialogue”

In the 1995 Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II reflects on the role of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome as an office of unity. In acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of Christian Communities, the pope bears in mind the request made of him to find a way of exercising the primacy of the Bishop of Rome which is open to a new situation (# 95).

He acknowledges the immensity of this task, one which he can neither refuse nor carry out by himself. On the basis of the “real but imperfect communion between us”, he invites Church leaders and their theologians to engage with him in a “patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea ‘that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me’ (*Jn* 17:21)?”

The papal invitation was issued to an ecumenical context, and so it seemed appropriate for the Anglican-Roman Catholic Bishops' Dialogue of Canada (hereafter referred to as ‘the dialogue’ or ‘the dialogue group’) to respond. Anglican and Roman Catholic leaders in Canada, with the theologian members of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada, have engaged with each other on the question of papal primacy in service of unity in the meetings of 1996-2000. The encyclical’s invitation to pastors and theologians to participate in the process suggests a response which takes seriously both the pastoral and theological dimensions of the question. The lengthy conversations have indeed been a “patient and fraternal dialogue”, in which we have listened to each other, mindful of Pope John Paul II’s admonition to keep before us only the will of Christ for his Church.

While the task initiated by *Ut Unum Sint* has engaged us for many years, and will for years to come, we nonetheless present an initial summary of our conversations. As a dialogue document, the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of all the participants unless a consensus is clearly identified. We present our findings as part of an ongoing engagement with the Bishop of Rome in his quest.

2. The New Situation

- a. The dialogue group drew attention to the question of an exercise of primacy which is “open to a new situation” addressed in paragraphs 88-96 of the encyclical and reflected on what is meant by the expression “new situation.” Aspects of this new situation can be identified as follows:

- i. Through the 20th century ecumenical movement, churches and Christian communities have a clearer understanding of sharing in a common faith and a greater willingness to seek for the unity beneath present divisions
 - ii. In particular, there has been a sustained dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church at international and national levels. Understandings of the nature of the church and ordained ministry have been clarified. Anglicans and Roman Catholics are discovering that their heritage of shared faith brings them into a closer relationship with one another than with the secular society in which they live.
 - iii. With the Second Vatican Council's renewed understanding of ecclesiology, the framework for a discussion on papal primacy has changed. Specifically, there have been developments in the theology of the local church, an understanding of the Church as a communion of churches, reflection on the place of ministry within the church and on the exercise of ministry as a guarantee of legitimate diversity.
 - iv. Both Anglican and Roman Catholic churches have experienced a new rootedness in different cultures. Neither is primarily European any longer. In this context, the exercise of primacy must not only encourage a diversity of customs and traditions in liturgy, law and spirituality, but also foster a sense of belonging to one community of faith.
 - v. The growth of democracy is a significant feature of the modern world. Thus, members of all churches are increasingly living in societies which are marked by the democratic ideas and ideals of inalienable rights and participation in decision-making.
 - vi. The rapidity of travel and communication in contemporary society could be a major factor in encouraging better relations among the churches. Yet, this same phenomenon could also be a means of increasing centralization and control to the detriment of local diversity and initiatives.
- b. The Church is in a new cultural situation, more democratic, less attached to monarchical and bureaucratic models. However, forms of authority inherited from previous generations still have an influence on the way authority is exercised today. What exercise of primacy is necessary in the new situation?

3. **The Difficulties and Challenges around Universal Primacy**

- a. *Ut Unum Sint*'s call to conversion leads us to consider seriously the insights of the other's church based on their experience of primacy. Part of our conversion involves

taking responsibility for inaccurate perceptions of each other, and for our own role in contributing to false impressions of ourselves.

- i. The media has not been helpful in restoring accurate perceptions about primacy in each of our churches. Media coverage tends to exalt the personal image of an individual leader, which can give an inaccurate impression of the roles of both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Rome.
 - ii. Anglicans tend to perceive the Roman Catholic exercise of primacy as being too highly centralized; Roman Catholics tend to perceive the Anglican exercise of primacy as being too diffuse and ineffective.
 - iii. Primacy is not exercised in a vacuum. The dialogue group assumes that it is exercised collegially. Collegiality implies participation in a process of discernment and decision.
- b. Some members of the dialogue noted the fear about a universal primacy, particularly about the implications of “immediate and ordinary” jurisdiction.
 - c. Questions were raised about the role of the Curia at the service of papal primacy. Others need to be associated with each bishop for them to be able to exercise their ministry; this is no less so for the Bishop of Rome. However, there is a perception the structure, attitude and approach of the Curia may cause problems because at times its members appear to be speaking in the name of the Pope. The Curia has administrative and support functions which ought neither to detract from nor replace the appropriate personal, collegial and communal functioning of either the Bishop of Rome or the local bishops. The situation is parallel to that of episcopal conferences: “The essential fact must be kept in mind that the Episcopal Conferences with their commissions and offices exist to be of help to the Bishops and not to substitute for them.” (*Apostolos Suos*, 18) While it may appear difficult to separate the notion of universal primacy from the perceived role of the Curia, it was noted that a consideration of universal primacy must be separated from concerns about the Curia. Yet, a change in the understanding of primacy will have an impact on the way the Curia functions.
 - d. The dialogue group reflected on a recent Anglican experience which demonstrated a problem when primacy at the international level is absent. The recent collapse of the Province of Rwanda is a case which illustrates the Anglican dilemma in which there was no structure beyond the Provincial level with the authority to intervene. The Archbishop of Canterbury’s intervention in the life of this local Church was welcomed yet without precedent in that it went beyond the normal structures of authority.

- i. At the international level, the meetings of the primates of the Anglican Communion wrestle with what it means to be a primate and to exercise authority in another way than as a diocesan bishop.
 - ii. The *Virginia Report* of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission raises important questions about the adequacy of Anglican instruments of authority.
 - iii. The Anglican understanding of primacy continues to evolve. Bishops note that in popular culture there is a connection made between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, but this is far from being a direct parallel.
- e. Lastly, questions were raised about the *necessity* of papal primacy. Is a Christian community less than “church” because it lacks a universal primate? Can a church maintain its unity without a universal primate? Is it essential that *episcopate* be exercised at the universal level by a person? (*Authority in the Church II*, 12, 31)

4. **Episcopal Ministry as Personal, Collegial and Communal**

- a. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* takes the three categories of personal, collegial and communal as important for the ordering of ministries. This triad has informed much subsequent ecumenical discussion, including the reflections of the Groupe des Dombes. In various churches, one or another aspect has become overemphasized at the expense of others. The bishops observed the examination of the Groupe des Dombes on how each church treats Matthew 16. Roman Catholics tend to stress the personal. Anglicans and Orthodox tend to emphasize the collegial, while Protestants stress the communal. What needs to happen in each of our households to restore a healthy balance in the order of ministry, and at the level of primacy? What conversion is required?
- b. Specifically, the bishops in the dialogue asked: what is your experience of the episcopate, as a personal, collegial and communal ministry? In light of their responses to this question, they then moved on to consider how they would understand the universal primacy as a personal, collegial and communal ministry, and how they would hope to experience the episcopal ministry of primacy in a renewed structure.
- c. The Church’s leadership has personal, collegial, and communal aspects at all levels. *Ut Unum Sint* recognizes that the ministry of the bishop of Rome cannot be separated from the college of bishops. Similarly, a bishop’s exercise of primacy and *episcopé* is always both personal and collegial. This recognition puts our two churches on common ground. The term ‘collegiality’ may not be as helpful as the term ‘fraternal’, nor can ‘communal’ be equated with ‘democratic’. Thinking of primacy

as a familial relationship of one among equals in the family serving the sisters and brothers may be more helpful than the language of 'college'. It was noted that 'fraternal' is one of the earliest designations of Christians, and that while it is difficult now from a language point of view, it offers a great advantage over monarchical terms and models drawn from hierarchical cultures.

- d. A simple comparison of our two traditions might suggest that Roman Catholics experience primacy largely as personal and Anglicans experience primacy largely communal. On closer examination, however, it is clear that both churches live with primacy exercised as personal, communal and collegial, albeit at different levels. Moreover, the experience of primacy in one tradition may provide an authentic challenge to the other tradition.
- e. Anglicans experience personal primacy on a number of different levels: the diocesan bishop, metropolitans, national primates, and the ministry of the Archbishop of Canterbury. There is no experience of a universal primate in Anglicanism, and efforts to see the Archbishop of Canterbury as assuming such a role have been resisted.
- f. Roman Catholics experience personal primacy on the level of the diocesan bishop and the Bishop of Rome. While parallel structures of metropolitans and national primates do exist and have some moral authority, they appear to be largely honorary in nature.
- g. Anglicans experience communal *episcopate* also on a number of levels. For example, diocesan, provincial and general synods are primarily instances of communal *episcopate*, as such bodies have legislative and doctrinal authority. These synodal bodies include members of the laity, clergy and bishops. At the international level pan-Anglican congresses, and meetings of the Anglican Consultative Council, which include bishops, clergy and laity, are also instances of communal *episcopate*, and they are consultative in nature.
- h. Likewise, Roman Catholics experience communal *episcopate* at many levels. For example, diocesan synods, which are consultative in nature, and which contain members of the laity, clergy and bishop(s). Roman Catholics also have general particular Councils, which are made up of bishops, and which have legislative and doctrinal authority.
- i. Questions were raised by the bishops regarding synodality and its relationship to communal *episcopate* and collegiality. Synodality is a metaphor of movement, of bishops, clergy and people being together on the way. In each church, bishop and people act together in a synodical way; there are significant differences between each

church as to how much authority is given to clergy and lay people in synods, yet in both churches the word of the bishop confirms decisions.

- i. It was noted that in the Roman Catholic Church's experience of synodality, diocesan synods do not have a legislative status; they are consultative and make recommendations. Nevertheless, they are a way of involving lay people in setting priorities and addressing questions. The difficulty arises when the questions raised go beyond the competence and jurisdiction of the local bishop. However, the experience of discussing the various questions about the life of the Church is an important aspect of synodality.
 - ii. Anglicans reflected on their experience of synods, which are legislative in matters of doctrine and worship, election of bishops, administration and finance. Not all synods will arrive at the same decision on any given issue; for example, the communion of children. At regional, national and international levels, there may be great difficulty in coming to a common mind, and there are debates within Anglicanism as to whether and when contentious issues should be decided by majority vote. No decision of a diocesan synod takes effect until it is approved by the bishop. At a General Synod, each order (laity, clergy, bishops) must approve legislation, thus ensuring that bishops, no less than lay and clerical members, have an effective veto.
- j. "Synodality" offers a different category for thinking about episcopal leadership within the community. Synodality cannot be understood simply by looking at synods; it refers to a deeper level of the Church's life. In a profound sense, the bishop is identified with the local community. A synod, then, even when in some contexts it is constituted only of bishops, is not just a meeting of hierarchs, but a meeting of the churches. The word of the bishop, then, needs to include and express the word of their church. *Episcope* is exercised in the context of synodality in order to assist the local churches to follow Jesus.
- k. Anglicans have wide ranging experience of collegial *episcope*. In Canada, there are the meetings of the House of Bishops at the national level under the presidency of the national Primate, as well as provincial Houses of Bishops under the presidency of the metropolitan. Houses of Bishops have moral authority in matters of discipline and doctrine. At the international level there is the Lambeth Conference of Bishops every ten years under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In between Lambeth Conferences there are regular meetings of the primates of the Anglican Communion, also under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Both these instances of collegial *episcope* are consultative in nature.

- l. Roman Catholics have similar experiences of exercising episcopal ministry in a spirit of collegiality. For example, there are national conferences of bishops, such as the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, under the presidency of an elected president. There are regional meetings of bishops' conferences, such as the inter-American meeting. There are also instances of occasional meetings of presidents of episcopal conferences. The Roman Catholic Church has synods of bishops which gather internationally around specific themes which are consultative.
- m. What can we learn from one another?
 - i. Anglicans and Roman Catholics have noticeably similar experience of the collegial exercise of *episcopate*.
 - ii. Anglicans are challenged to recover personal primacy at the universal level. Roman Catholics are challenged to restore personal primacy at the various intermediate levels between the local bishops and the Bishop of Rome, namely the personal primacy of metropolitans and national primates.
 - iii. Canadian Anglicans may be challenged to give doctrinal and legislative authority to the levels of communal authority beyond their Province, while Roman Catholics may be challenged to give such authority to local synods. While synods of bishops and general councils may be instances of communal *episcopate*, because they are limited to bishops, they seem to Anglicans more to be exercises in collegial rather than communal *episcopate*. Roman Catholics may be challenged to widen the membership of these international bodies.
 - iv. It is interesting to note that Anglicans and Roman Catholics have inverted levels of authority around the different arenas of the exercise of *episcopate*. For example, Anglican diocesan synods are legislative, while Roman Catholic local synods are consultative. The Lambeth Conference is consultative, while general Councils (and synods of bishops) have legislative and doctrinal significance.

5. **Primacy within the Context of Episcopal Ministry**

- a. Since ARCIC assumes that the discussion of primacy appears within the context of episcopal ministry, the members of the bishops' dialogue considered the experience of *episcopate* and primacy in their own lives and ministries.
- b. Following "Authority I" of the *Final Report*, the bishops note the direction of the discussion from ministry to episcopacy to primacy. Pastoral responsibility belongs primarily to the bishop. Yet within the life of the early Church, bishops in principal sees began to exercise a ministry of oversight and pastoral responsibility with other

bishops. The bishop of a principal see assists the other bishops in seeking a common mind, points out areas for reform, and assists the local bishop in faithful teaching. It is within this context that we understand the role of the bishop of Rome as one who promotes the communion of the churches; all primacy is to serve the koinonia of the churches.

- c. The analogous relationship between the primacy of bishops of principal sees and the universal primacy of the bishop of Rome suggests different levels of subsidiary primacy and authority in the life of the Church. The dialogue examined the subsidiary level of metropolitan, to see how our two communions operate at this level.
 - i. Anglican experience in Canada lays some importance on the primacy of metropolitans, who do in fact have to exercise authority of discipline in respect to diocesan bishops, and this is a necessary service for the whole Church. All diocesan bishops take an oath of obedience to the metropolitan. Metropolitans oversee the elections and consecrations of diocesan bishops. Roman Catholic experience in Canada lays less emphasis on metropolitans. While provincial metropolitanical structures exist, they appear more honorific than functional vehicles of regional or subsidiary primacy.
 - ii. If Anglicans can consider primacy at the regional or national level, they might be able to envision it universally. If Roman Catholics can consider primacy universally, they might be able to consider it incarnate at the regional or national level. Collegiality pertains, strictly speaking, to the whole College of Bishops, but at the regional and national levels bishops work together in a spirit of collegiality.

6. **The Primacy of the Bishop of Rome**

- a. The dialogue affirmed that the primacy of the Bishop of Rome is situated within the college of bishops. The primate may speak for all the pastors, but his ministry cannot be separated from that of his “brothers in ministry”. *Ut Unum Sint*’s reference to the role of the Bishop of Rome as “strengthening the brothers” is helpful. The primacy is exercised in service of the communion of all churches. Through his ministry of unity, the Bishop of Rome ensures that the local churches, with their particularities, remain open to full catholicity and that all are held together in communion. He recalls the common good over individual interest. This involves power and authority. It entails *episcopo* over Word and Sacraments, mission, discipline and the Christian life.
- b. The bishops are collegially responsible for proclaiming and interpreting the apostolic faith. In such a context, one bishop may speak for the other bishops after

consultation with them. With “Authority I” of the *Final Report*, we understand that the role of primacy may make definite judgements. Primacy exercises genuine *episcopate* when it fosters *koinonia* by assisting local bishops in their task of apostolic leadership. Primacy helps the churches to listen to one another; it promotes Christian spontaneity and does not seek uniformity at the expense of valid diversity which does not threaten unity. Our reflections on primacy owe much to the vision of ARCIC, and with the *Final Report*, as well as *The Gift of Authority*, we see no other place where this can be located other than in the Bishop of Rome.

- c. Universal primacy needs to be balanced with subsidiary levels of primacy, particularly metropolitans, conferences of bishops and, or, national primates. The bishops discussed the possibility of an Anglican “patriarchate.” In light of current experience of Eastern Catholic Churches, how would such a patriarchate be interpreted? Could there be new continental equivalencies to the older patriarchates? This might help to distinguish the role of the bishop of Rome as Patriarch of the West from his universal primacy. The bishops discussed greater autonomy for local churches in catechesis, liturgy, and the nomination of bishops. There could be greater attention to the inculturation of the gospel. Such a less centralised “Church Catholic” might have wide ecumenical appeal.

7. **Overcoming the Divisions of the Second Millennium**

We wish to encourage patient dialogue and careful study of ARCIC II’s, *The Gift of Authority*. ARCIC believes that: “[F]or the sake of *koinonia* and a united Christian witness to the world, Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops should find ways of cooperating and developing relationships of mutual accountability in their exercise of oversight.” (#58) We celebrate our ongoing national bishops’ dialogue. We encourage implementation of the ARCIC recommendation that Anglican bishops be associated with Roman Catholic bishops in their *ad limina* visits to Rome.

In his Apostolic Letter on *Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000 (Tertio Millennio Adveniente)*, Pope John Paul II encourages all Christians to promote “fitting ecumenical initiatives, so that we can celebrate the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, *at least much closer to overcoming the divisions of the second millennium.*” (# 34) The Anglican/Roman Catholic Bishops’ Dialogue of Canada hopes that these reflections on the exercise of papal primacy may help to further this goal. Echoing the words of Pope John Paul II at the holy door ceremony of January 18, 2000, “[W]e know we are brothers still divided, but we place ourselves with decisive conviction on the path that leads to full unity.”

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