

'Salvation and the Church': Observations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Cardinal Willebrands' letter to the ARCIC-II Co-chairmen

Cardinal Willebrands, President of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, sent the following letter to the ARCIC-II co-chairmen, Bishop Cormac Murphy-O'Connor (Arundel and Brighton, England) and Bishop Mark Santer (Birmingham, England) on 25 October, 1988.

Your Excellencies,

I forward herewith a set of Observations on *Salvation and the Church* together with accompanying Commentary which have been prepared by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The Congregation's Observations together with the further explanations contained in the Commentary are self-explanatory. I would like, however, to make two observations. First of all, I would underline the affirmation made at the beginning of the Congregation's Observations

that their judgement of *Salvation and the Church* is 'substantially positive'. The CDF does not find itself at the point of being able to endorse the report's final affirmation (N° 32) that the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion 'are agreed on the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation and on the Church's role within it'. Nonetheless the Observations affirm that '*Salvation and the Church* can be interpreted in a way that conforms with Catholic faith'. Likewise the Commentary affirms the genuine progress that has been made along the path of agreement of faith on this vital matter. I would simply remark that this in itself is no mean achievement given all the historical and theological difficulties associated with the doctrine of justification.

Secondly, I would draw your attention to the important point made in the Observations' Conclusion: 'The divergences which, in the light of this document still exist between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion principally concern certain aspects of ecclesiology and sacramental practice'. I am aware that the Commission is currently engaged in an ecclesiological study. I would wish to encourage and support you in this task since I am persuaded that a deeper ecclesiological study could help to underpin and further the degree of agreement realised in *Salvation and the Church*. . . .

. . . I take this opportunity to assure you, and through you all the members of the Commission, of my genuine appreciation of the work you have done so far and of the steadfastness with which you are confronting the difficult issues that remain on your agenda.

I offer you my warm good wishes, and am

Yours sincerely in Christ,
JOHANNES CARDINAL WILLEBRANDS,
President

Response

The co-chairmen replied to the Cardinal's letter on 15 November, 1988.

Your Eminence,

We are grateful to you for sending us copies of the Observations on *Salvation and the Church* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith together with their Commentary. We also wish to express our deep appreciation of your own accompanying letter.

We note the points you make. We are encouraged by the positive response of the Congregation to our work on the doctrine of salvation. We accept the need for further and deeper work on the doctrine of the Church. Your letter, and the Observations of the Congregation, will help the Commission to give greater specificity to this study, particularly with reference to the sacramental character of the Church and its concrete realisations in the life of the Christian community.

As Co-Chairmen, and on behalf of the other members of the Commission, we wish to express our profound appreciation of the personal support and encouragement which you continue to give to us in our work.

Observations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the report of ARCIC-II: *Salvation and the Church*

Preface

The following observations constitute an authoritative doctrinal judgement which is offered to the members of the Commission for the furthering of the dialogue. They have been prepared by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith within the framework of its contacts with the Secretariat for Christian Unity.

1. General judgement

Taken as a whole, even though it does not present a complete teaching on this question and even though it contains several ambiguous formulations, the document of the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC-II) entitled *Salvation and the Church* can be interpreted in a way that conforms with Catholic faith. It contains a number of satisfying elements, notably on points that have been classically controversial.

The judgement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on this report is therefore substantially positive. We are not, however, at the point of being able to ratify the final affirmation (N° 32) according to which the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion 'are agreed on the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation and on the Church's role within it'.

2. Principal observations

(a) The document is written in a *language* which we might describe as symbolic and it is therefore difficult to interpret it univocally. Such an interpretation is necessary given that the purpose is to reach a definitive declaration of agreement.

(b) *On the chapter 'Salvation and the Faith':*

- because of the importance, in discussion with Protestants, of the whole problem of *sola fides*, a more extended discussion of this controversial point would be desirable;
- it would be good to have further precision on the relationship between grace and faith as '*innum salutis*' (cf. N° 9);
- the relationship '*fides quae - fides qua*', together with the distinction

between 'assurance' and 'certitude' or 'certainty' needs to be better developed.

(c) *Concerning the chapter 'Salvation and Good Works':*

- it would be appropriate to give more precision on the doctrine of grace and merit in relation to the distinction between justification and sanctification;

- if the formulation '*simul iustus et peccator*' is to be retained it should be explained more fully so as to avoid all ambiguity;

- in general, the sacramental economy of grace in the regaining of freedom out of sin should be put more in evidence (cf. for example nn. 21 and 22).

(d) *Concerning the chapter 'The Church and Salvation':*

- the role of the Church in salvation is not only to bear witness to it, but also and above all, to be the effective instrument – notably by means of the seven sacraments – of justification and salvation: this essential point needs to be further elaborated, especially in relation to *Lumen Gentium*.

- it is particularly important to draw more clearly the distinction between the holiness of the Church as universal sacrament of salvation on the one hand and its members, who in some measure are still given to sin, on the other (cf. N° 29).

3. Conclusion

The divergences which, in the light of this document still exist between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion principally concern certain aspects of ecclesiology and of sacramental doctrine.

The vision of the Church as sacrament of salvation and the specifically sacramental dimension of man's justification and sanctification are too vague and too weak to allow us to affirm that ARCIC-II has arrived at substantial agreement.

Commentary on the Observations

(This English text is a translation of an Italian original.)

The nature of the Observations and the purpose of the present Commentary

The publication last year of *Salvation and the Church*, the (first) document of the second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC-II), was accompanied by a preliminary note which explained its status. Among other things it explained that 'it is not an authoritative declaration by the Roman Catholic Church or by the Anglican Communion, who will evaluate the document in order to take a position on it in due time'. For their part, the authors declared that 'the Commission

will be glad to receive observations and criticisms made in a constructive and fraternal spirit'.

The publication today, with the authority of a text approved by the Holy Father, of the Observations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the above mentioned document of ARCIC-II takes place with this in mind. The present Commentary on these observations is intended to facilitate understanding of the document and the Observations themselves, and consequently it is also intended to encourage the members of the Commission, especially the Catholic ones, in the continuation of the dialogue which began in 1982.

A point emphasised in the document

In the introduction, the authors sketch out a kind of typology of their respective positions, and maintain that they can identify an important cause of disunion in the different explanations of the relation between divine grace and human response. Leaving aside the inevitable oversimplifications in this sketch, one point emphasised in the document can be concentrated on: the interior transformation of the human person achieved by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Salvation really is, according to the document, a 'gift of grace' (n. 9), the 'gift and pledge of the Holy Spirit to every believer' (n. 10), who accomplishes in the believer his 'abiding presence and action' (n. 12). Properly speaking it is in this 'indwelling of the Holy Spirit' (n. 9), that consists the presence of the God who justifies through the gift of a righteousness 'which is his and becomes ours' (n. 15), and who realises in us 'deliverance from evil', 'putting away of sin', 'rescue from bondage', and 'removal of condemnation' (n. 13). This is not a title or a purely exterior imputation, but a gift which, by making them partakers of the divine nature, inwardly transforms human persons (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 40).

Seeking to express the different understandings of the verb '*dikaionai*', the document speaks of a 'divine declaration of acquittal' (n. 18), but first emphasises that 'God's grace effects what he declares: his creative word imparts what it imputes. By pronouncing us righteous, God also makes us righteous' (n. 15). This is followed by the specification, 'the righteousness of God our Saviour is not only declared in a judgement made by God in favour of sinners, but is also bestowed as a gift to make them righteous' (n. 17). From a juridical perspective, righteousness represents the 'verdict of acquittal' of sinners, but, at the ontological level, it is necessary to say that 'God's declaration of forgiveness and reconciliation does not leave repentant believers unchanged but establishes with them an intimate and personal relationship' (n. 18).

On this subject, we point out incidentally the ambiguity of the reference to the Lutheran expression '*simul iustus et peccator*' (n. 21), which in any case does not belong to the Anglican tradition. If one really wishes

to maintain this formula, it would then be necessary to state what exactly is intended: not the existence of two states in the baptised person contradictory to one another (that of grace and that of mortal sin), but the possible presence, in the righteous one who possesses sanctifying grace, of that 'sin which does not lead to death' (1 John 5:17).

The problem of faith

As regards baptism, 'the unrepeatable sacrament of justification and incorporation into Christ' (n. 16), the document underlines, and not without reason, the importance of faith. '*Sacramentum fidei*': this expression of St Augustine, who is referred to here (n. 12), was repeated, as is noted, by the Council of Trent (DS 1529). Baptism is indeed a sacrament of faith, as is witnessed by the Scriptures and the Fathers. However, the document from the beginning strongly accentuates the subjective dimension of the faith (*fides qua*), explained primarily as 'a truly human, personal response' (n. 9), and 'commitment of our will' (n. 10), but only mentions 'assent to the truth of the gospel' in passing (n. 10). Even if the '*fides fiducialis*' is thus to a certain extent completed by the aspect of '*assensus intellectus*', in the relationship between '*fides qua*' and '*fides quae*' there nevertheless remains an imbalance to which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith draws attention in its Observations.

That faith is necessary for justification is a truth which cannot be questioned, but which must be properly understood. According to the Council of Trent, 'we are called justified through faith because faith is the beginning point of the salvation of the human person, the foundation and the root of every justification, "without which it is impossible to be pleasing to God" (Heb 11:6) or to come to share the destiny of his children' (DS 1532).

The affirmation, 'it is by faith that it (salvation, the gift of grace) is appropriated' (n. 9), takes on its full weight only in this light. If justification is above all the objective gift of God, which the sacraments communicate as principal instruments, faith does not cease to have, in reality, a decisive, even if subordinate, role. Only faith can, in fact, recognise the reality of this gift and prepare the spirit to receive it; only faith assures that inward participation in the sacraments which renders their action efficacious in the soul of the believer. At the same time faith, by itself, is not capable of justifying the sinner. Furthermore, in order to better clarify this point, it would have been useful to also treat the question of faith in the case of the baptism of children.

In order to fully take into account the incapacity of *sola fides* to justify the human person, the distinction between 'assurance' and 'certitude' or 'certainty' with respect to salvation should have been better explained. The authentic 'assurance of salvation' (n. 10; cf. n. 11), which the human person possesses, is founded on the certainty of faith that God wishes 'to have mercy on all' (Romans 11:32) and has offered to them, in the

sacraments, the means of salvation. This cannot mean a personal certainty of one's salvation, or of one's own state of grace, since the fragility and sinfulness of the human person can always be an obstacle to God's love.

The sacramental dimension of sanctification

The traditional Protestant fear referred to in the document (cf. n. 14) that the Catholic understanding of sanctification threatens the absolute gratuity of salvation does not seem well-founded, since one is quite aware that the totally free communication of grace comes from above (cf. John 3:7).

But it must be pointed out that the document does not sufficiently keep in mind the sacramental dimension of sanctification, alluding as it does only briefly to the post-baptismal sacraments, which are the privileged means of the communication of grace. In addition to the Eucharist, to which only passing allusion is made, and without much doctrinal rigor (cf. n. 16 and 27), emphasis should have been given in particular to the significance and the necessity of the sacrament of penance, of which – according to Catholic doctrine – 'repentance' (n. 21) is, although fundamental, only an aspect, and not reducible, moreover, to 'penitential disciplines' (n. 22).

Above all the affirmation of the document, 'it is by daily repentance and faith that we reappropriate our freedom from sin' (n. 21) deserved more precise explanation further on. It is true that repentance (and the faith which is a presupposition of it) constitutes the nucleus of conversion from sin, and that perfect contrition reconciles with God. But on this matter the Council of Trent makes the following decisive specification in this context: 'Although it sometimes happens that contrition is perfected by charity, and reconciles the human person with God before the effective reconciliation of the sacrament, nevertheless this reconciliation must not be attributed to the contrition itself apart from the desire for the sacrament ("*votum sacramenti*"), which is included in it' (DS 1677). In fact, the human person is freed from the 'sin which leads to death' (1 John 5:16) by means of sacramental contact with the Redeemer, or at least by means of the desire to be cleansed by a sacramental grace which no one can give to oneself.

Freedom and merit

With good reason the document seeks to address the question of good works beginning with a reflection on freedom, but the approach adopted remains insufficient from many points of view. The pre-eminent gift of that freedom which resulted from the redemption is properly underlined: 'In restoring us to his likeness, God confers freedom on fallen humanity'. But the explanation which follows provokes puzzlement: 'this is not the natural freedom to choose between alternatives, but the freedom to do his

will' (n. 19). Such an opposition between two kinds of freedom could in fact refer to a conception of human freedom which does not take full account of its created nature. According to Catholic doctrine, the deprivation of original righteousness which followed upon the sin of Adam makes human persons incapable of tending, with the powers that remain to them, towards the supernatural end for which they were created. Nevertheless, as the council of Trent adds in this perspective, sin does not totally corrupt human nature; it injures human nature without taking away its original capacity of pleasing God (cf. DS 1555, 1557, etc.).

With these premises in mind, it is now possible to address the problem of merit. For the purpose of excluding, correctly, an unacceptable understanding of salvation 'because of works' which would suppose the possibility of human persons attaining salvation through their own effort, the document turns to the Pauline expression, 'for the purpose of good works' (Eph 2:10; cf. also 2 Cor 9:8). The main section dedicated to this theme (n. 19 ff.) endeavours to reconcile the teachings of St Paul (Gal 2:16) and St James (James 2:17 ff.) on works. But a more exact placement of these teachings in their respective contexts would have contributed to a better grasp of the point which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith makes in this regard. St James affirms that we are justified by means of works and not by faith alone (James 2:24), while St Paul strongly emphasises that works carried out prior to faith are not meritorious, without hesitating, however, to invite the believer 'to be adorned with good deeds' (1 Tim 2:10). This means that human persons cannot merit fundamental justification, that is, cannot pass by their own effort from the state of sin to the state of grace, but that they are called and made able to 'multiply good works of every sort' (Col 1:10): not producing them 'from self' (John 15:14), but while 'living in the love' of Christ (John 15:9-10), love which 'has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

In this sense, to say that Christians cannot 'put God in their debt' (n. 24) is to limit oneself to an overly extrinsic affirmation with respect to inward co-operation with grace, such as the Church eminently contemplates it in the co-operation of Mary in the work of salvation. Such co-operation is not the condition of our being approved of in the eyes of God, or of his forgiveness; it is rather a grace that Christ confers freely and with absolute generosity. It is the fruit of the 'faith which expresses itself through love' (Gal 5:6).

The role of the Church in salvation

The Commission presents a rather vague conception of the Church which seems to lie at the base of all the difficulties that have been pointed out. Certainly, one can only be delighted by the fact that, in describing the Church, the notions of 'sign' (n. 26), 'instrument' and 'sacrament' (n. 29) are explicitly taken up, notions which the Second Vatican Council itself

proposed (LG 1, 9, 48). By the expression 'stewardship' (n. 27), its structural dimension is also emphasised. Indeed, the Church is not only a spiritual communion, but is also constitutively a 'visible organism', a 'society structured with hierarchical organs', through which Christ 'communicates truth and grace to all' (LG 8).

This aspect, which the Commission will still have to explore in greater depth – with particular reference to the Observations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Final Report of ARCIC-I¹ – attains however its authentic significance only because the Church is also and first of all a mystery of faith: '*Ecclesiae sanctae mysterium*' (LG 5). This point is truly decisive and only it permits a way out from the dead end of a primarily functional ecclesiology, at the mercy of human dispositions.

Moreover, only this point allows a true understanding of the foundation of the intrinsic relationship of the Church with salvation. This relationship is not absent in the document, particularly when the Holy Spirit is mentioned (n. 28) or when the Eucharist is examined (n. 27). Here also, however, some clarifications are necessary.

For example, it is said that in the Eucharist 'is celebrated' the 'once-for-all atoning work of Christ, realised and expressed in the life of the Church' (n. 27). Does this expression really indicate recognition of the 'propitiatory value' of the eucharistic sacrifice?² And does the term 'realise' imply therefore an authentic actualisation of this sacrifice through the mediation of an ordained minister,³ whose priesthood differs essentially from the common priesthood of the faithful (cf. LG 10)? The importance of these questions will be readily grasped, because when this doctrine is not fully accepted, the role of the Church in the furtherance of salvation risks being limited to witnessing to a truth that it is incapable of efficaciously making present, a truth which then risks being reduced to a subjective 'experience' which does not bear within itself the guarantee of its redemptive power.

As for doctrinal content, the Congregation perceives finally a certain equivocation on the nature of the '*Ecclesia mater*', connected with the stress on the idea, not erroneous in itself, of the Church 'in constant need of repentance' (n. 29) and 'of renewal and purification' (n. 30). It is true that the Council, while dwelling upon on the specific nature of the Church, wanted to correct what one could call a certain ecclesial 'mono-

1 'Observations on the Final Report of ARCIC by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith' *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 74 (1982) 1063–1074.

2 *Ibid.*, 1066. 'The propitiatory value that Catholic dogma attributes to the Eucharist, which is not mentioned by ARCIC, is precisely that of [the] sacramental offering' (Section B, I, 1).

3 *Ibid.* 'Through him [the priest] the Church offers sacramentally the sacrifice of Christ', (Section B, II, 1). '[The] real presence of the sacrifice of Christ [is] accomplished by the sacramental words, that is to say by the ministry of the priest saying *in persona Christi* the words of the Lord' (Section B, I, 1).

physitism', discreetly cautioning against an excessive assimilation of the Church into Christ. The Church is the immaculate Bride whom the spotless Lamb has purified (LG 6), but the Church is also made up of human persons, and as such 'is called by Christ to that continual reformation of which, as a human and earthly institution, she always has need' (UR 6).

This entirely human aspect of the Church is real, but must not be taken in isolation. In her most inward essence, the Church is 'holy and immaculate' (Eph 5:27), and precisely for this reason she truly is the 'universal sacrament of salvation' (LG 48, cf. 52), and her members are 'holy' (I Cor 1:2, II Cor 1:1). The fact that she, as a pilgrim, 'clasps sinners to her bosom' (LG 8) and is thus 'imperfect' (LG 48) does not keep her from being 'on earth already endowed with real holiness' (LG 48) and 'necessary for salvation' (LG 14). In fact, she carried out her salvific mission not only 'through the proclamation of the gospel of salvation by her words and deeds' (n. 31), but also, as mystery which remains in human history, through communication of divine life to human persons, and casting the light which shines forth from this divine life into the whole world (cf. GS 40).

Substantial agreement?

The preceding analysis has shown that the document of ARCIC-II contains many satisfying elements concerning a traditionally controversial subject. One can only congratulate the members of the Commission for having sought to highlight the 'balance and coherence of the constitutive elements' of Christian doctrine and salvation (n. 32). The criticisms which have been expressed do not in any way deny the fact that they have been partially successful. But one cannot affirm that full and substantial agreement on the essential aspects of this doctrine has been achieved, primarily because of deficiencies concerning the role of the Church in salvation. To the concern of trying to attain unity on such a central point, what one could call, based on St Irenaeus, 'the patience of growth into maturity' would have been preferable.

Already in its Observations on the Final Report of ARCIC-I, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cautioned against the ambiguity of common texts which leave open the 'possibility of twofold interpretation'.⁴ The same observation can be made today concerning

4 *Ibid.*, 1064–1065. 'Certain formulations in the Report are not sufficiently explicit and hence can lend themselves to a two-fold interpretation, in which both parties can find unchanged the expression of their own position. This possibility of contrasting and ultimately incompatible readings of formulations which are apparently satisfactory to both sides gives rise to a question about the real consensus of the two Communions, pastors and faithful alike. In effect, if the formulation which has received the agreement of the experts can be diversely interpreted, how could it serve as a basis for reconciliation on the level of church life and practice?' (Section A, 2, iii).

Salvation and the Church. The language used is strongly symbolic, as is shown for example by the image of 'stewardship' to indicate responsibility in the Church. Thanks to its expressive qualities, the document has been successful not only in strengthening in its readers an eager search for unity in the faith, but also in suitably placing it within the hermeneutical horizon of biblical language, along the lines of Vatican II and some recent encyclicals of Pope John Paul II.

Nevertheless, it should be recognised that the symbolic nature of the language makes difficult, if not impossible, a truly univocal agreement, where, as is the case here, questions are treated which are decisive from the dogmatic point of view, and figure among the historically most controversial articles of faith. By using more rigorous doctrinal formulations, though not necessarily scholastic ones, one would have better avoided the doubts which surface in dialogue if one does not always seek a rigorous comparison between the respective positions, or if one is sometimes satisfied with a consensus which is almost entirely verbal, the fruit of reciprocal compromises.

Without disavowing anything in a method which has produced incontestable results, one could still ask if it would not be opportune to perfect the procedure in such a way as to permit a more precise determination of the doctrinal content of the formulas employed to express a common faith. Would it not be suitable, along these lines, to also point out, possibly in a separate protocol, the elements on which divergences remain?

Likewise, it would be desirable to see more attention devoted to the Tradition, particularly to the Fathers, and to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, as well as to the official acts of the Anglican Communion, for example the 'Thirty-nine Articles of Religion'.

The questions and the considerations raised in the Observations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have the sole purpose of encouraging the members of ARCIC-II to move forward along the road they have been following since 1982, when, instituting this second Commission, Pope John Paul II and the Anglican primate Dr Robert Runcie conferred on them the specific task to 'examine, especially in the light of our respective judgements on the final Report [ARCIC-I], the outstanding doctrinal differences which still separate us, with a view towards their eventual resolution. . . .'

5 *Ibid.*, 1065. 'It would have been useful – in order to evaluate the exact meaning of certain points of agreement – had ARCIC indicated their position in reference to the documents which have contributed significantly to the formulation of the Anglican identity (*The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, Book of Common Prayer, Ordinal*), in those cases where the assertions of the Final Report seem incompatible with these documents. The failure to take a stand on these texts can give rise to uncertainty about the exact meaning of the agreements reached' (Section A, 2, iii).

6 *Common Declaration*, n. 3, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 74 (1982) 925.