

Anglican - Catholic Relations, 2003

The year 2003 in Anglican-Catholic relations was characterized by signs of promise and the emergence of obstacles; by the abiding search for unity and the threat of fragmentation. Many published accounts of our relations over the past months have focussed exclusively on the latter element of each pairing, but an accurate account of our relations needs to see both lights and shadows, and to see them as they impact upon each other.

In February of 2003, Archbishop Rowan Williams, former Primate of the Anglican *Church in Wales*, was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury and President of the Anglican Communion. Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, Archbishop of Westminster, led the Catholic presence at the enthronement. At the request of the Archbishop, Cardinal Kasper gave an address on behalf of all the guests at the banquet immediately following the liturgical celebration, stressing the ecumenical bridges which have been built over the past 40 years, and the bridges which we need to continue to construct together. Pope John Paul II sent greetings to Archbishop Williams, along with the gift of a pectoral cross. In his letter of thanks to the Holy Father, the Archbishop reflected on their common mission in terms of bearing the cross of Christ. Personal and public exchanges at the enthronement reflected the close relations which exist between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church.

During the Spring and Summer of 2003, however, decisions concerning human sexuality in two provinces of the Anglican Communion signalled the possible emergence of a new obstacle in our quest for full communion. The Canadian diocese of New Westminster authorized a public rite of blessing for same sex couples, while the Episcopal diocese of New Hampshire in the United States of America elected as their next bishop an openly gay priest living in a committed homosexual relationship. His election was later confirmed at the *Episcopal Church's* General Convention, and he was consecrated a bishop in November. These decisions, against the recommendation and judgement of every instrument of unity within the Anglican Communion (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, the annual meeting of the Primates) and despite strong opposition from many other Anglican provinces and from within the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, have led to serious internal tension within the Anglican Communion.

In October of 2003, the Archbishop of Canterbury paid his first visit to the Holy See. The visit of Archbishop Williams and his delegation, scheduled long before the aforementioned events had unfolded, included a meeting with Pope John Paul II,

meetings at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, prayer at the tomb of St Peter, and the installation of a new director (Bishop John Flack) of the Anglican Centre in Rome.

The Holy Father and Archbishop Williams assured each other of their ongoing commitment to search for full visible unity and to finding appropriate ways of engaging, whenever possible, in common witness and mission. Pope John Paul reflected on how four centuries of division have given way to “a pattern of grace-filled meetings” between the Bishop of Rome and the Archbishop of Canterbury, meetings which give expression to “our anticipation of the full communion which the Holy Spirit desires for us and asks of us.” Archbishop Williams expressed his thanks to the Holy Father for a pontificate which has been “a source of strength to countless Christians”, and specifically mentioned the generous invitation (in *Ut unum sint* n.96) to enter into a patient and fraternal dialogue about the Petrine ministry. The Archbishop noted that he would “be glad to participate in the reflection on the possible sharing of a Primacy of love and service.”

The decisions of the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of New Westminster concerning human sexuality were alluded to by the Holy Father, who spoke of new and serious difficulties which have emerged in our relations, noting that “these difficulties are not all of a merely disciplinary nature; some extend to essential matters of faith and morals.” The controversial decisions and the subsequent tension within the Anglican Communion were discussed at length during meetings at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The Catholic opposition to these decisions was clearly set forward, and in a candid but friendly manner the possible implications for our relations were reflected upon. Cardinal Kasper noted that as ecumenical partners, we are not simply observers: the decisions of one partner impinge upon relations with all the others, and therefore these decisions should be taken in consultation with one another. He added that it was precisely in the midst of problems that dialogue was most necessary.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury met with the other Primates of the Anglican Communion shortly thereafter, they reasserted traditional Anglican teaching on human sexuality, and asked the Archbishop to set up a commission “to offer advice on finding a way through the situation which currently threatens to divide the Communion.” Recognizing that the Anglican Communion is at a critical juncture, the commission is to make practical recommendations geared towards maintaining the unity of the provinces, and to explore the possibility of the Archbishop of Canterbury exercising pastoral oversight in other Anglican provinces in exceptional circumstances. The commission was requested to report back to the Archbishop of Canterbury by October, 2004.

Given that the forthcoming year will be an important period of discernment within the Anglican Communion, and that the decisions made will have a significant impact on the Anglican - Catholic relations, those responsible for our relations met to reflect on an

appropriate way of proceeding for the coming year. It was determined firstly that the Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), which is the main instrument of theological dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church, should proceed until the completion of its current work on the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life and doctrine of the Church. Thereafter, attention will be given to planning the future agenda and next phase of the theological dialogue. Secondly, it was decided that the next plenary session of the International Anglican - Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM), which is an episcopally led body aimed at fostering practical initiatives that would give expression to the degree of faith shared by Anglicans and Catholics, should be postponed. While its work towards the publication and reception of a Common Statement of Faith is to be put on hold in the light of ecclesiological concerns raised by the current situation in the Anglican Communion, the work of its sub-committees could proceed where appropriate. Finally, Cardinal Kasper welcomed the request of His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, that an appropriate means be found to reflect jointly upon the ecclesiological issues raised by recent developments within the Anglican Communion in the light of the relevant Agreed Statements of ARCIC. It was decided that an *ad hoc* sub-commission of IARCCUM would be established to this end. One part of its mandate would be to point to resources from our common tradition, and most especially from ARCIC's work on ecclesiology, authority and morals, which might provide ways forward for the Anglican Communion.

Relations with the Anglican Communion reflect both the hopes and the struggles of the current ecumenical landscape. Cardinal Kasper recently noted that the two international commissions of Anglican - Catholic relations (ARCIC and IARCCUM) "undertake positive and fruitful work, perhaps more than any other dialogue"; but that relations with the Anglican Communion also highlight "the current problem and aporia of ecumenism", namely the emergence of new ethical problems and internal ecclesial fragmentation. As with previous obstacles in Anglican - Catholic relations, the current difficulties are closely linked to questions of authority within the church. From a Catholic perspective, the value placed by Anglicans on diocesan and provincial autonomy, and the legitimacy given to a comprehensive range of practices and doctrinal positions on matters of faith and morals within the Anglican Communion, result in a lack of clarity concerning the bonds of ecclesial communion shared by Anglicans, and tend to limit what it is possible for us to do in terms of advancing our relations.

Anglican theologian Mary Tanner recently noted that the Anglican Communion is "a Communion *in via*, struggling to understand how decisions are to be made, how communion is to be maintained when questions of truth and unity are posed and how to develop structures of belonging." Escalating internal tensions have signalled the urgency of these matters, and have brought the Anglican Communion to a crossroads. The shape of our future relations will depend greatly on the response given to the current situation. In the meanwhile, it is important to reflect on how far we have come in our relations. For

most of our separated past, when decisions were made which deepened the gap between us, they were made in isolation. Today, close communication, rigorous dialogue, friendship and multi-faceted avenues of collaboration and shared witness all contribute to warm relations, and there is a genuine desire to resume the search for serious ways to advance our relations as soon as possible - all the while recognizing that the resolution of the current tensions will determine to a significant extent what avenues remain open. It is surely a hopeful sign that as the Anglican Communion finds itself at a crossroads, a space has been created for the fruits of our 35 years of dialogue to feed into the Anglican discernment process. The Archbishop's gracious invitation is an acknowledgement of the value of our dialogue and its attempt to address the issues over which we have been divided, and provides an opportunity for the dialogue's impressive documents to speak to the current context and hopefully to make a contribution at a critical moment in the life of the Anglican Communion.

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