

Churches in Communion?

By Bishop David Chislett SSC

YOU only have to keep an eye on the blogs to know that uninformed speculation continues regarding the approach of the Traditional Anglican Communion (TAC) bishops to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in Rome. This article is an attempt at putting some of the discussion in its proper context.

The 2007 letter signed by the bishops in Portsmouth refers to the prayer Jesus prayed on the night before he died for the unity of all who believe in him.(1) It outlines the twentieth century movement of Rome and Canterbury towards full ecclesial reunion, to which many of us have been personally committed for most of our lives. It makes reference to the historic visit of Archbishop Michael Ramsey to Pope Paul VI in March 1966 (2) and the work of the subsequent Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). Older readers will recall how in those days Paul VI startled his own Curia by referring to the Anglican Communion as a "sister Church", a term up until then reserved for the Eastern Orthodox Churches - a term emphatically no longer used by Rome of the Anglican Communion.

I remember those heady days. Most Anglicans felt that, by the grace of God, the time was coming when, to use the phrase Paul VI borrowed from the Malines Conversations (1921-1925), the Anglican Communion would be united with but not absorbed by Rome, with due honour given to the authentic "patrimony" of Anglicanism. Even Anglicans who didn't really approve understood that the process was well and truly under way.

If it was clear that Rome and Canterbury were engaged and looked forward to a wedding, as early as the mid 1970s it was also becoming clear that on the Anglican side a rampant promiscuity was breaking out that threatened the engagement. Significant parts of the Communion were creating new obstacles to the unity longed for by so many; obstacles as inconsistent with a plain reading of Anglican formularies as they are with the Faith received from the Apostles and maintained by the wider Catholic Church.

At the most theological level was the purported ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate, with its consequent undermining of sacramental certainty and the classical Anglican understanding both of authority and the given-ness of the Faith. More recently the growing ambivalence towards authentic Christian sacramental and iconographic teaching on gender and sexuality, upon which the ordination of women depends, has given rise to the homosexual crisis which threatens to blow the Anglican Communion apart.

Many Anglicans who (rightly) recognised that in terms of catholic sacramental life the rubicon was, in fact, the purported ordination of women, reorganized themselves in ways that would enable them to continue living according to the Gospel and the Catholic Faith. Where possible this was done "just on the inside" of the Anglican Communion, with priests and people gathering around orthodox bishops and dioceses, and - from the early 1990s - within Forward in Faith in the U.K., North America and Australia. The provision of Provincial Episcopal Visitors ("flying bishops") in England enabled a more or less sacramentally distinct regrouping of Anglican catholics "just on the inside" of the mother Church of the Communion.

In contrast, predominately liberal Anglican churches in places like North America, South Africa and Australia adopted a scorched earth policy, denying the "sacramental space" needed by the consciences of the orthodox. So, in these countries the kind of Anglicans who in England are found in parishes under the episcopal care of flying bishops have mostly had no alternative than to regroup as Continuing Anglicans "just on the outside" of the official liberal church in order to live according to the Gospel and the Catholic Faith.

Many of these Continuing Anglican churches comprise the Traditional Anglican Communion, which is the largest grouping of such communities. The TAC maintains a communion relationship with Forward in Faith, and some bishops and priests of the TAC are even licensed to officiate in orthodox parts of the Anglican Communion.

TAC leaders have had informal talks with Vatican officials for nearly twenty years. The 2007 letter from the TAC bishops to the Holy See sought a way of moving to the next level, and signified our desire to continue the ARCIC process to full ecclesial reunion where the Anglican Communion as a whole effectively left off. It stands to reason that a fairly significant regrouping of Anglicans that refuses to embrace the new obstacles to unity should be able to continue down that path.

In a statement released on 25th February 2009, the TAC's Primate, Archbishop John Hepworth, explained that the intention of the bishops was to

"seek a communal and ecclesial way of being Anglican Catholics in communion with the Holy See, at once treasuring the full expression of catholic faith and treasuring our tradition within which we have come to this moment."

He went on to say,

"We remain in quiet prayer, while growing our Communion in key parts of the world. We agreed, rightly, to allow the Holy See the opportunity to respond to the difficult problems that our letter undoubtedly caused. When there is a reply, I am committed to presenting it to a full meeting of our College of Bishops, and to formal meetings of each of the general synods of our churches that voted to support this initiative." (3)

I have written before on this matter, noting that there is - as one would expect - a variety of views about us among Roman Catholic leaders in this country as well as in the Vatican. Many of our critics (including some former Anglicans!) resent the approach we have made. They insist that the only way open to Anglicans seeking full communion should be individual "conversion." Furthermore, it is known that some Roman Catholic authorities work against us because of their friendships with liberal Anglican Communion bishops.

On the other hand, among bishops and other Roman Catholic authorities worldwide there is an increasing desire to support us, even to the extent - in some places - of routine sharing of buildings and other resources.

The publicity resulting from the article in the Perth Record led many people to conclude that what was being sought by the TAC is a "personal prelature," - a recently devised way of being Roman Catholic in which the clergy are subject, not to the diocesan bishop, but to another bishop somewhere else. Opus Dei is so far the only personal prelature.

In fact, the precise shape of what will work for us is still to be devised. As Professor Tracey Rowland points out in *Ratzinger's Faith*, her survey of Joseph Ratzinger's theological and philosophical thinking, "When it comes to the more practical questions about the way of moving forward toward Christian unity, Ratzinger has stated that Catholics cannot demand that all the other Churches be disbanded and their members individually incorporated into the Catholic church. However, Catholics can hope that the hour will come when 'the churches' that exist outside 'the Church' will enter into its unity. They must remain in existence as churches, with only those modifications which such a unity necessarily requires. In the meantime the Catholic Church has no right to absorb the other churches. The Church has not yet prepared for them a place of their own to which they are legitimately entitled." (4)

Professor Rowland then outlines the approach of the TAC to Rome as a possible example of such a process beginning.

Some Roman Catholics and Anglicans, emphasising the Anglican tradition's origin within the Latin Church, do in fact confine their thinking to a personal prelature kind of sub-grouping. Others of a similar mind look for a more fully developed version of The Anglican Use as it exists in the USA.

Ecumenists can be found, however, who are quite adventurous in suggesting that the so-called "uniate" Churches in full communion with Rome offer the best model for Anglicans seeking an ecclesial future in full communion. These are ritual churches "sui iuris" - in other words, churches with their own rites, cultures and canon law. And although, as Archbishop Hepworth pointed out in his statement, "most of these rites are descended from ancient churches that have never been part of the Roman or Western rite",⁽⁵⁾ leading English theologian Fr Aidan Nichols OP has publicly supported the uniate model as a viable model for an Anglican Rite Church. Indeed, seventeen years ago in "The Panther and the Hind" he explored what such an Anglican Church in full communion with Rome might look like:

"An Anglican church united with Rome . . . might be a church with a religious metaphysic drawn from the Cambridge Platonists, supplying as this would a doctrine of creation, and an account of the human being 'in the image and likeness of God', necessary to the theocentric humanism of any truly Catholic tradition; a doctrinal and sacramental ethos taken from the Restoration divines, with their stress on the inseparable inter connexion of Incarnation, Church and liturgy; and a missionary spirit borrowed from the Evangelical movement, and centred therefore on the universal significance of the Saviour's atoning work - the whole to be confirmed and, where necessary, corrected by acceptance of the framework of the Roman Catholic communion, including the latter's teaching authority to determine those many questions of faith and morals which, historically, have kept Anglicans divided. In such a way, numerous elements of the Anglican theological tradition 'classics', both as texts and persons - could find repatriation in the Western patriarchate, in peace and communion with that see with which the origins of English Christianity are for ever connected. Such an Anglican Uniate community might be relatively small in numbers, yet, provided with its own canonical structure, liturgical books, parishes, and means of priestly formation, it would enrich Roman Catholicism with its own theological patrimony, and - in the atmosphere of ecumenical detente which holds good in the West, though not, alas, the East, fulfil the role of 'bridge-Church' between Canterbury and Rome."⁽⁶⁾

More recently, in his paper "Anglican Uniatism", Nichols says that the concept of an Anglican Church "sui iuris"

". . . would have to be presented prudently to the wider Catholic public. It can certainly be pointed out that the Second Vatican Council goes out of its way, in the Decree on Ecumenism, to give a special place to Anglicanism among the ecclesial communities that emerged from the Church crisis of the sixteenth century, and assurances that whatever is valid in the patrimony of Anglican worship, thought and spirituality, could be preserved in Catholic unity have been forthcoming, if in very general terms, from post-Conciliar popes. Places to look would be, for instance, the speeches of Paul VI at the canonisation of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales and of John Paul II on his visit to Canterbury Cathedral. St Thomas Aquinas, when speaking of the variety of Religious Orders in the Church, liked to cite the psalm which, in its Latin version, describes the Church as 'circumdata varietate', surrounded by variety. The pains and purgatories of the post-Conciliar period have taught us to treat 'variety' with some caution, since pluralism comes in two forms, the legitimate and the anarchic. But an Anglican Uniate body, defined with discernment and sensitivity, could I believe, join the ranks of the Churches sui iuris which give Catholicism an indispensable dimension of its plenary or holistic quality."⁽⁷⁾

It is clear that Rome is talking to a range of Anglicans at the moment. The TAC is merely the group out in front. Whatever form an "Anglican Church in full communion" might take, it will obviously need to be capable of drawing into its life waves of likeminded Anglican Catholics from a variety of backgrounds and jurisdictions.

Let us continue to pray for those involved in the dialogue that they will have the gift of wisdom and insight in the consideration of what will one day be seen as a momentous and historic act of ecclesial reunion.

In the meantime, let us try to understand that at the most basic level the Catholic Church already comprises a range of "churches in communion," of various rites, and that most of the day-to-day work of the Holy Father is not in his role as pope and pastor of the Universal Church but in his patriarchal role in the Latin Church. The churches in communion (and their membership numbers in 2005) are: (8)

1. The Patriarchal Latin Rite Catholic Church (Membership: 1,070,315,000)
2. The Patriarchal Armenian Catholic Church (Membership: 368,923)
3. The Patriarchal Coptic Catholic Church (Membership: 242,513)
4. The Ethiopian Catholic Church (Membership: 196,853)
5. The Patriarchal Antiochan Syrian Maronite Catholic Church (Membership: 3,106,792)
6. The Patriarchal Chaldean Catholic Church (Membership: 382,637)
7. The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church (Membership: 3,752,434)
8. The Patriarchal Syrian Catholic Church (Membership: 123,376)
9. The Syro- Malankara Catholic Church (Membership: 404,052)
10. The Patriarchal Melkite Catholic Church (Membership: 1,340,913)
11. The Italo-Albanian Catholic Church (Membership: 60,448)
12. The Ukrainian Catholic Church (Membership: 4,321,508)
13. The Ruthenian Catholic Church (Membership: 497,704)
14. The Byzantine Catholic Church USA (Membership: 100,000)
15. The Romanian Catholic Church (Membership: 746,000)
16. The Greek Catholic Church in Greece (Membership: 2,345)
17. The Greek Catholic Church in Former Yugoslavia (Membership: 76,670)
18. The Bulgarian Catholic Church (Membership: 10,000)
19. The Slovak Catholic Church (Membership: 225,136)
20. The Hungarian Catholic Church (Membership: 268,935)
21. The Russian Catholic Church (Membership: 20 parishes worldwide)
22. The Belarusian Catholic Church (Membership: 100,000)
23. The Albanian Catholic Church (Membership: 3,000)
24. The Georgian Catholic Church (Membership: 7,000)

NOTES

1. John 17:20-21 "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me . . ."
2. The Pope and the Archbishop affirmed their desire ". . . that all those Christians who belong to these two Communions may be animated by these same sentiments of respect esteem and fraternal love, and in order to help these develop to the full, they intend to inaugurate between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion a serious dialogue which, founded on the gospels and on the ancient common traditions, may lead to that unity in truth, for which Christ prayed."

www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19660324_paul-vi-ramsey_en.html

3. See: <http://www.themessenger.com.au/News/20090225.htm>
4. TRowland, *Ratzinger's Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 98-99. 5
5. Ibid.
6. A. Nichols, *The Panther and the Hind* (T&T Clarke, Edinburgh, 1993), 178.
7. A. Nichols, *Anglican Uniatism* (*New Blackfriars* Volume 87 Issue 1010, 2006), 337-356. This paper can be downloaded gratis from:
http://www.anglicanuse.org/Anglican_Uniatism.pdf
8. *The Eastern Catholic Churches* by Kevin R. Yurkus in *Crisis Magazine* July 2005 Morley Publishing Group Inc. Washington
Bishop David Chislett SSC is Vicar General of the Anglican Catholic Church in Australia, Regional Bishop of the Northern Apostolic District, Australia and Rector of Patmos House Community, Brisbane.