

THE GOSPEL AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH CONFERENCE

CHRISTIAN UNITY – BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON SOME OBSTACLES AND GOALS

A RESPONSE TO THE RIGHT REVD JOHN HIND

I want to thank Bishop John for his paper – broad in its sweep and challenging in its analysis. This brief response will be very inadequate and can at best address only a couple of small aspects of the range that Bishop John has set before us, majoring on Bishop John's statement that Anglicans can not be as proud about translating their considerable ecumenical contribution into concrete acts of reconciliation.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote.

I was appointed to the staff of Lambeth Palace towards the end of 1987 when Robert Runcie was at the centre of a storm of controversy surrounding the suicide of Gareth Bennett and the whole 'Crockford's Affair'.

My appointment was 'Assistant Secretary for Ecumenical Affairs'. Back in 1975, as an ordinand, I had been Philip Usher Scholar and had lived in the Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies in Thessaloniki for nearly a year. On returning to England I had been involved in the Church of England/Church of Greece Pastoral Exchange Scheme which had been set up by Stephen Verney, Bishop of Repton. I had also extended my interests to the Syrian Christians of South India. A decision had been made to strengthen the ecumenical staff at Lambeth Palace prior to the 1988 Lambeth Conference. They were looking for someone with some expertise on the Eastern Churches and, out of a very small field, they chose me.

I was the *Assistant* Secretary. *The* Secretary was Canon Christopher Hill, subsequently Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, then Bishop of Stafford and, later, of Guildford. Currently Bishop Christopher is President of the Conference of European Churches. At the time he was the Anglican co-secretary of ARCIC.

It was in the heady days of ARCIC 1. The Final Report had been sent around the Provinces of the Anglican Communion. Most of the responses were positive. It was expected to be officially endorsed at the forthcoming Lambeth Conference. The Vatican response was expected imminently. There was a feeling that something momentous was about to happen.

Prior to my appointment to Lambeth I had been lecturer in Christian worship at Trinity College, Bristol. Shortly after my arrival in the Ecumenical Affairs office, Christopher asked me to do some preliminary thinking about a liturgical project. (As Christopher put it, there's no point in having a dog and barking yourself.) The project was what liturgical form the restoration of communion between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church might take. That was a heady request for a junior staff member! The most recent unity scheme around was the Covenant for Unity based on the Ten Propositions. That had proposed a day of liturgical events including the consecration of bishops. I remember working with that model and envisaging a service where the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury might jointly consecrate the first of a new generation of bishops whose Orders would be recognised by both Churches.

We were that close! Or at least so it seemed to some of those closely involved.

In retrospect that moment was a high water mark. The tide has been going out ever since.

What happened of course, is that the Vatican response to ARCIC I was not announced prior to the Lambeth Conference. I remember the gathering disappointment in our office as the days went by and nothing was heard from Rome.

The response, when it eventually came – *in 1991* - was disappointing. A widespread criticism of the response was that those who made it failed to understand the methodology of the dialogue – to get behind the language of the years of separation and look to the Gospels and our shared tradition, as Paul VI and Michael Ramsey had agreed. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in a statement released at the time, while each Church had been asked if the Agreed Statements were *consonant* with its faith, the Roman Catholic Church seems to have understood the question to be ‘Is the Final Report *identical* with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church?’ The Archbishop added, ‘if either Communion requires that the other conforms to its own theological formulations, further progress will be hazardous’.

I want to suggest that the Vatican’s 1991 response fits a pattern that has characterised ecumenical endeavour in the past half century – namely that unity initiatives have been halted by the refusal of what one might call the more conservative partner to act, and that as a result, the other partner has felt itself free to move further away from the historic Christian consensus.

I do not claim that what I am going to say has been rigorously historically tested, nor am I able to do so here, but I think the possibility of a pattern is worth considering.

And that pattern is simply that there seem to have been several occasions when the more conservative partner in a dialogue, by failing to take bold action, allowed the less conservative partner to move further away from traditional faith and practice. Let me give you some examples.

The first is the Anglican-Methodist unity proposals of the 1960s. I was a teenage altar boy and one of my best friends was the son of the local Methodist minister, so I was vaguely aware of and interested in what was going on. The precise details of the process and votes need not concern us. During the years of Conversations the Methodist Church put on hold moves towards the ordination of women ministers knowing that this would prejudice the chance of unity with the (then) more conservative Church of England. When the Church of England rejected the unity scheme a second time in 1972, the Methodist Church in Britain proceeded to the ordination of women ministers in 1974. Today Methodism embraces a range of beliefs and practices that John and Charles Wesley simply would not recognise.

The second example could be the Ten Propositions and Covenant for Unity that was killed off by General Synod in 1982, but rather let us simply log Rome’s response to ARCIC I which I have already mentioned in more detail. That response, as I have said, came eventually in 1991. There was a feeling that the process had hit the buffers (Bishop John spoke of the frustration of the course set in motion by the Malta Report and Paul VI and Michael Ramsey), which some in the

Church of England welcomed. In November 1992 the General Synod voted to allow the ordination of women as priests.

My third example is from outside the Anglican world, though is not without points of contact with it. After a century of intermittent contact and dialogue, from 1975 to 1987 representatives of the Orthodox Churches and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht were engaged in a high level official dialogue which produced substantial agreed statements on a range of subjects – published in German, French and English in 1989, with the English text published by the Polish National Catholic Church as *The Road to Unity* in 1990. Having achieved a remarkable degree of agreement, the next challenge was how to give it ecclesial expression – the full communion for which generations of Old Catholics had hoped, worked and prayed. At this point things began to unravel. There will of course be differing views on the reason why. In September 1989 Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland of the Ecumenical Patriarchate gave a lecture in Utrecht (at which I was present) in which he stated that Old Catholic intercommunion with Anglicans (and to a lesser extent with Lutherans) was a major obstacle to further progress. Another interpretation is that the Orthodox, faced with a Church that had agreed to everything it had been asked, simply didn't know what to do next. The Orthodox had no model or mechanism for moving towards sacramental communion with a non-Orthodox Church. The whole process stalled and many within the Old Catholic Churches realised it was not going to produce any outcome. Six years later, in 1996, the Old Catholic Church in Germany ordained a woman priest. Switzerland and the Netherlands soon followed. The blessing of same-sex unions soon became permitted in the European Old Catholic Churches. The 1996 ordination prompted the suspension of full communion by the Polish National Catholic Church the following year, leading to its eventual expulsion from the Union of Utrecht in 2003. The Polish National Catholic Church has subsequently formed the Union of Scranton (one of whose bishops is here today). Meanwhile, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church held in Crete in 2016, which might have been expected to be in a position to announce the establishment of sacramental communion with the Old Catholics, had nothing to say on the subject. (Though it should be noted that within the Union of Scranton the Nordic Catholic Church is currently actively and positively engaged with the Ecumenical Patriarchate.)

My fourth example is on a much smaller scale (and you have to be a real ecumenical geek to be aware of this one). In 2009 a number of Church of England priests asked the Free Church of England to enter into dialogue with the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Scranton. The International Catholic Bishops Conference of the Union of Scranton approved the dialogue, as did the Convocation of the Free Church of England. There were visits and conversations in this country, in Norway and in Scranton. Episcopally-led delegations visited each other's parishes and saw something of local church life. There was the possibility of drawing in more recently formed Continuing Churches represented in the UK. The dialogue prompted the Free Church of England into producing a thorough statement of its faith and ecclesiology – *Anglican Ecclesiology and the Gospel: The Renewing of a Vision*. But in 2014 the initiative faltered, with the Union of Scranton diverting its UK focus to setting up a system of 'oratories' instead. It is my personal view that the opportunity to create in the UK a nationwide Catholic Church of Anglican patrimony was lost and that all parties – and the unevangelised - are the poorer as a result.

As I said earlier, all of these need to be rigorously tested, but there does seem to be a pattern of what we may call the more conservative (or perhaps, the more 'catholic' – at least in their own eyes) partners getting cold feet at the very point where an ecumenical encounter required them actually to *do* something. And, it could be argued, in the first three of these cases, that failure to act has enabled the other partner to be pushed by internal forces further away from orthodox faith and practice.

Now, I fully appreciate that all this could be presented from the other perspective. That the more conservative partners breathe a sigh of relief and say, thank goodness we didn't go any further with that lot, otherwise we would have been irreparably damaged by an influx of people who would have wanted to push a liberal agenda. But I am not sure that would have been the only outcome. There would have been realignment and some of it might have been good.

The other big question is of course that which was woven throughout Bishop John's narrative – explicitly and implicitly. What *is* our goal? The goal, surely, has to be a degree of unity visible enough for the *world* to see and recognise. Our Lord's prayer is "ἵνα ὧσιν ἐν ... ὧσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν, ἵνα γινώσκῃ ὁ κόσμος ὅτι σὺ με ἀπέστειλας (John 17:22-23) – perfected into one that the world may know.... That is why, to my mind, pious platitudes about spiritual unity when all the world sees is division and competition are utterly inadequate. Bishop John has reminded us that the Anglican goal has traditionally been the restoration of 'full, visible unity' – the word *visible* in that phrase is particularly important.

It is also why, in my opinion, church unity schemes are important, though that view is very out of fashion these days – I have heard it dismissed as 'ecclesiastical joinery'. We are all aware of the vast amount of painstaking ecumenical dialogue that has taken place – and of the remarkable degree of agreement and convergence that has resulted. But the generation that began the dialogue processes by and large did so with the intention that they should produce results in terms of new ecclesial realities on the ground – 'concrete acts of reconciliation' to use Bishop John's phrase. However, it feels as though the generation that has inherited those results has lost the will or the vision to give them practical expression. 'Reconciled diversity' seems a very inadequate outcome for those decades of toil and hope. But church unity *can* be done – even Anglicans can do it! The present day Free Church of England is the result of the uniting of *three* independent Anglican jurisdictions – the original Free Church of England, formally constituted in 1863, the UK branch of the Reformed Episcopal Church (formed in 1873 in North America and which today is a constituent part of the Anglican Church in North America) and the Reformed Church of England (a relatively short lived breakaway movement, though very successful at planting churches). That union was consummated in 1927 and last year Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali kindly preached at a service to mark the 90th anniversary. The irony is that in the same year as we celebrated Anglican unity, Gavin Ashenden's episcopal status was made public and Jonathan Pryke and Andy Lines were consecrated, thus introducing three new potentially rival Anglican jurisdictions in the UK. Even within the Anglican family, we still have a long way to go.