

## THINKING ABOUT RELATIONS WITH OTHER CHURCHES

In November the Pope announced a 'new' constitution for disaffected Anglicans who might want to become part of the Roman Catholic Church. It ruffled a few feathers in the Church of England because of lack of consultation before it was issued. Shortly afterwards the Archbishop of Canterbury was in Rome to speak at a Symposium to celebrate the work of Cardinal Willebrands. Rowan Williams gave a clear and sharply focussed paper on the issues that needed to be dealt with in relations between the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics. These relations had been tested by the ordination of women as clergy and bishops in Anglican churches and later by the ordination as clergy and bishops of openly gay people. These issues had deeply divided Anglicans, and still do. They created real problems for Roman Catholics.

Johannes Willebrands was president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity from 1969 to 1989 when the Secretariat was reconstituted by John Paul II as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and Willebrands was succeeded by the Australian, Cardinal Edward Cassidy. Willebrands was the main figure in ecumenical relations for the Roman Catholic Church in a time of significant rapprochement with other churches following Vatican II. The Anglican Roman Catholic Anglican Commission (ARCIC I) began in 1969 the same year that Willebrands, took over the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. ARCIC I had an Australian member, Donald Cameron.

ARCIC I set out a method of dealing with doctrinal disagreement that involved looking behind the historic formulations and seeking for common ground out of which fresh formulations of the disputed doctrines could be attempted. ARCIC I produced reports on the Eucharist, ordination and authority in the church. Their statements on Eucharist and ordination were received by the Lambeth Conference in 1988 as consonant with Anglican teaching. The statement of authority was seen as a useful basis for continuing conversation.

ARCIC II, which included an Australian, Charles Sherlock in its membership, began to publish documents in 1987 on Salvation in the church, church as communion, Life

in Christ: Morals, the Gift of Authority, which considered the question of a universal primacy, and a final document published in 2005, Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ.

The Lambeth Conferences have been generally receptive to these reports and have reported general but by no means universal support from the provinces of the Anglican Communion. The reality out on the ground is somewhat different. There is strong opposition in some places and significant disinterest in many places.

It is therefore important to recognise that when the ARCIC documents are referred to as agreed statements that means they have been agreed by the members of ARCIC. There is a significant problem about saying they are agreed by each of the participating groups. The Roman Catholic Church is a global church which claims universal jurisdiction for the Pope within its own community. It therefore has a recognised institutional mechanism for giving assent or not on such a global issue. Anglicanism does not have such institutional arrangements. Its understanding of the church is first of all local in character and the wider the reach the looser becomes the authoritative decision making capacity.

The day after Rowan Williams' address at the Willebrands seminar he met with Pope Benedict XVI and they agreed to continue the ARCIC conversations. This third phase will deal with The Church As Communion – Local And Universal, and how in communion the local and the universal church comes to discern right ethical teaching. Some time soon people will be appointed to this new ARCIC III.

The theme will present some challenges for Anglicans since it is intimately involved in the present conflict in the Anglican Communion over the proposed covenant, which amongst other things sets out to establish a mechanism to deal specifically with the question that ARCIC III is asked to consider. We should not expect ARCIC III to come up with some comment on this in the very near future. These things quite properly take time.

But there is something else going on here which is both interesting and important. We all know that in any conversation with someone want to get on with and yet disagree with we try very hard to understand where they are coming from and go some way to move to where they are in order to achieve that understanding. In conversations like ARCIC this sort dynamic is necessary and important if there is to

be real engaged understanding out of which enhanced mutual respect can grow. It is not surprising that Anglicans should be observed moving in the direction of their Roman Catholic friends in the way they deal with this conversation. After all the Roman Catholic members of ARCIC know they have a clear global decision making procedure which is not affected by their conversation with the Anglicans. The Anglicans on the other hand do not have such a decision making mechanism and yet the conversation seems to call for one.

It is not surprising that the modest recognition of the Lambeth Conferences becomes in popular talk, things which have been agreed. Even the normally very careful Rowan Williams at the Willebrands seminar spoke of important matters on which there is already clear agreement. Not quite I think. General reception by the bishops at Lambeth and uneven responses from the provinces in more the case. And that does not account for divergent views within the provinces.

The Lambeth Conference in 1998 was also interested in organisational things like the movement of clergy from one church to another. Then in November 2001 a meeting of Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops pressed for a commission that could promote practical organisational things between the churches that would build on the agreements made by ARCIC. A commission was established and it produced an action plan, most of which turned out to be about further consultations.

It is not altogether clear what the purpose of all this dialogue and ambiguous agreement is for. Some leading people speak of the aim as full organic union. But this is the kind of language that dropped out of ecumenical conversations in the last quarter of the last century in no small measure because it was an impossible dream. But I doubt very much if the organisational re-unification of the churches is any kind of dream. Rather it seems to me that in that in the case of the main Christian traditions they each contribute something to the general overall picture of Christianity. Their separate organisational arrangements embody different elements in Christian faith. We should be grateful for the clear gospel statement that the confidence of the papacy enables the Pope to make from time to time. A clarity and confidence generally lacking in Anglicanism because we do not have the kind of institutional arrangements that would facilitate such confidence in one person or office.

The final unity of all Christians really belongs in the realm of eschatology. It is a hope we look forward to. The real issue for us now is the way in which we are able to show genuine understanding, respect and love to our fellow Christians in other churches. Australia has had a long and bad history of sectarian conflict and the absence of anything that looked like genuine Christian love between the churches. That history has now receded thankfully and we should be concentrating on finding ways to express Christian love and respect to our fellow Christians out of the integrity of our own tradition of faith. The real significance of ARCIC is that it helps us to do that.