

Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue ponders new affirmation of unity, new signs of strain, March 1-3, 2007

Co-chairs: Mgr. François Lapierre, P.M.E. (Diocese de Saint-Hyacinthe), Archbishop Bruce Stavert (Diocese of Quebec). Present: Dr. Susan Brown (King's University College at the University of Western Ontario, London), Dr. Catherine Clifford (St. Paul University, Ottawa), Rev. Jacques Faucher (Archdiocese of Ottawa), Rev. Kevin Flynn (St. Paul University, Ottawa), Dr. Joseph Mangina (Wycliffe College, Toronto), Rev. Dr. David Neelands (Trinity College, Toronto).

As secretary to the dialogue for the Anglican Church of Canada: Rev. Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan. Acting as recorder for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops: Ms. Janet Somerville.

Regrets: Ms. Ann Cruickshank (Hudson QC); Rev. Dr. Luis Melo S.M. (University of Manitoba); Rev. Dr. Gilles Routhier (Université Laval, Québec); Rev. Captain Michelle Staples (Canadian Forces chaplaincy).

Although extreme weather, deaths in the family and military re-assignment (one member is a Canadian Forces chaplain) kept four regular participants away, the members of Canada's official Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue faced a packed agenda as the group met March 1-3, 2007, at Galilee retreat centre in Arnprior, Ontario.

Their work-load included study of documents that reflect contrasting dimensions of the many-leveled, world-wide conversation linking Anglicans and Roman Catholics in a shared struggle to discern how Christ's will for the unity of Christians can be best honoured, here and now, in the life of their churches.

One strand of this world-wide conversation is the theological dialogue led by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). The agreed statements of this Commission have, since 1970, found fresh and common expression for many doctrinal themes that are foundational for faith in both traditions. Previous agreed statements (on Eucharist, on ministry, on authority in the church, and later on salvation, church as communion, and life in Christ) have helped members of both churches understand the breadth of their agreement on fundamental doctrine, and also have pinpointed the issues on which some disagreement remains.

The most recent agreed statement is ARCIC II's study of Mary in the Christian tradition. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* has been considered in two previous meetings of Canada's Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue (ARC), both of which included public lectures on the statement. On March 1, the Canadian theologians, led on this point by Dr. Catherine Clifford of Ottawa's St. Paul University, outlined their reflections on *Mary Grace and Hope* for eventual publication. Drafts of this five-part reflection will be written between now and the September meeting of the group. The concepts for the *Mary* essay are clear in everyone's mind, but they left open the question of their publishing strategy. Will this be an ecumenical teaching offered for ordinary church-goers in Canada? Or will it be an official response from this country to ARCIC II, helping the international group to understand how their work is received in the Canadian context, with its particular memories and opportunities?

(Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ was completed in 2004, published in 2005, and published with commentaries and a study guide in 2006, edited by Donald Bolen and Gregory Cameron, by continuum (London, New York), 258 pages.)

A more recent strand in the global web of Anglican-Roman Catholic encounter is the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM). Born in the year 2000, this new Commission is a gathering of bishops from both churches. Their mandate, grounded in the good experience of forty years of dialogue about theology, is to be *pastoral* leaders in the growing together of the two churches: “to translate our manifest agreement in faith into common life and mission”, as its co-chairs wrote in October 2006.

Growing Together in Unity and Mission is the joyful first publication of IARCCUM. Forty pages long, it is full of practical suggestions of how Roman Catholics and Anglicans can work and serve their neighbours together more often, pray and study together more regularly, celebrate together the meaning of their baptism in Christ, and live the fruits of their shared faith down to the grass-roots of both churches. The ARC theologians, looking at this statement for the first time on March 2, enthusiastically agreed to recommend it to the bishops and ecumenical officers of both their churches. The four participants who are professors and/or administrators at graduate schools of theology commented that in Canada, many of the recommendations in *Growing Together* are already the norm here.

In considering *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*, the meeting had expert help. Bishop John Baycroft, now retired and living in Ottawa, battled his way through a snowstorm to meet with ARC. Bishop Baycroft has been with IARCCUM since its first breaths, and was one of the drafters of the newly-released document. He pointed out that the *Growing Together* document is a first in Anglican-Roman Catholic ecumenical history: an agreed international statement by *bishops* of both churches. As such, this document is not “waiting for reception” by the leaders of the churches, as is usually the case with statements agreed to by theological dialogues. It is itself *an act of reception* by church leaders of a whole generation of convergence on the level of the expression of faith.

One small fact about *Growing Together* points, however, at a different dimension of our recent ecumenical history. A draft of this text was ready nearly four years ago. But storm-clouds appeared on the horizon as the Anglican communion world-wide entered into a difficult, historic debate occasioned by developments in the two North American Anglican churches. In Canada and in the USA, many church members now consider that faithful, committed same-sex unions should be accepted and blessed by the church. This conviction is strongly challenged by some within the North American churches and by many in other regions of the Anglican world. The resulting debate still presents a danger that the full communion among Anglican “provinces” world-wide could be broken.

Should the interpretation of the sources of revelation on God’s will for persons with a homosexual orientation be seen as a “church-dividing” issue? If Anglicans conscientiously disagree on this, can they nevertheless remain in ecclesial communion with each other? Some Anglican provinces, for example, still do not ordain women to the priesthood; but Anglican provinces have not withdrawn from communion with each other over that difference. And: what should be the international process for ruling on this much-debated question? Within each province and each diocese there is a due order for working towards consensus on doctrine. But what is the process for the Anglican communion as a whole?

With anguish and much labour, leaders in the Anglican communion—from the Archbishop of Canterbury to unofficial bloggers on the Internet—have been seeking for faithful answers to these questions. This labour towards discernment has already produced several history-making documents. One is the **Windsor Report (2004) of the Lambeth Commission on Communion**, commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury and mandated to report to him on how to maintain

the fullest possible communion while providing for Anglicans whose consciences drive them in diverging directions on the issues now being raised. Rev. Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan, Director of the national office of Faith, Worship and Ministry for the Anglican Church of Canada (and secretary of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue) was a member of the Commission which wrote the Windsor Report. (*The full text of the report is available at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/>*)

The Anglican Church of Canada, following a debate at its own 2004 General Synod about the blessing of committed same-sex relationships, asked its national-level theological commission to answer this question: is same-sex blessing a matter of doctrine? If doctrine is involved, any change would require a long and careful process (perhaps the framing of a new canon) if change were to be authorized. The considered answer of The Primate's Theological Commission is contained in **the St. Michael Report**. (www.anglican.ca/primate//ptc/StMichaelReport.pdf)

On the international level, the Windsor Report had proposed that a common declaration describing how the provinces of the Anglican communion cohere might help to restore an orderly unity. Accordingly, an international group was tasked to draft what is currently being referred to as a **“covenant” for the Anglican Communion**. The draft now exists and is beginning to be discussed and considered in various countries/provinces of the church. (<http://www.aco.org/commission/covenant/index.cfm..>)

All of these texts were on the table for discussion by ARC/Canada as the two co-chairs and the eight members of the dialogue met and prayed together for grace and light. In the absence of Professor Fr. Gilles Routhier who had been asked to lead discussion of the Windsor Report, conversation focused more on the St. Michael Report, with Dr. Susan Brown of King's University College (London, Ontario) taking the lead.

Dr. Brown noted the points in the St. Michael Report with which Catholic theology would agree: for example, that since the doctrine of the church has always been definitively expressed in its liturgies, a public and official (liturgical) blessing of same-sex unions would be a teaching gesture with doctrinal implications. The St. Michael Report affirms that doctrine is indeed at stake in the proposal of blessing, but not “core doctrine”, and so concludes that the doctrinal implications of such a liturgical action would not be sufficiently serious to be “church-dividing”. Dr. Brown found the Report's description of “core doctrine” (roughly equivalent to the Roman Catholic concept of “dogma”) to be more narrowly limited than a Roman Catholic description would be.

Would the innovation of blessing same-sex unions affect the church's doctrine about marriage? The Report answers “yes” to this question, noting that the public blessing would tend to make the union analogous to a marriage, with doctrinal implications that ought to cohere with the teaching about matrimony. Here, Dr. Brown went back to ARCIC's 1994 agreed statement “*Life in Christ*”, which affirmed that for both church traditions, “a faithful and lifelong marriage between a man and a woman provides the normative context for a fully sexual relationship.” Dr. Brown considers that for a church to treat same-sex union as analogous to marriage would reveal not a simple case of Anglican/Roman Catholic pastoral diversity, but would be a sign “that agreement on a deeper level is not as solid as we thought or as it used to be.”

It was clear, Dr. Brown noted, that the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church could not now support the blessing, or the ethical approval, of a sexually active same-sex relationship. However, both our traditions affirm the goodness of friendship and of life-long fidelity. The mutual affection and faithful commitment of a homosexual couple could be understood in both traditions as “a means of grace”. Could only that committed-friendship dimension be blessed and celebrated in an

Anglican rite, leaving to private decisions the adherence to celibacy or not? Or at least, could we affirm together that the life-long mutual commitment could be a means of grace, and “keep talking to one another as we try to understand the other aspects of this issue more clearly?”

In conversation during and after Dr. Brown's presentation, there was agreement that Canadian society today does not value marriage as highly as did our grandparents, and that the credibility of the traditional church teachings on sexuality and marriage has been fractured in our culture. Is this situation one more challenge to the church to resist being “conformed to this world”, and to act through God's grace with culture-transforming courage? Is it also a challenge to struggle together for a deepened theological anthropology that can take seriously new insights from modern science and the vast change in our society's understanding of sexuality and gender? Both understandings of God's leading were present in the conversation in Arnprior.

Before the group left the topic of doctrine about same-sex relationships and marriage, Canon Barnett-Cowan explained the proposal that seems likely to be presented to the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada in June 2007. General Synod may be asked to vote on a new canon governing the blessing of same-sex unions, including whether that blessing should be offered only to those civilly married.

Treating the issue by way of canon law sets the bar very high, Dr. Barnett-Cowan noted, because a new canon requires a two-thirds majority vote by each of the orders of bishops, clergy and laity. Even then, the decision must be made afresh at the next General Synod, three years later.

Other moments in the three-day meeting reflected both the joy and the difficulty of sustained ecumenical sharing. For Archbishop Bruce Stavert (Anglican Diocese of Quebec), this was his last meeting with the dialogue, which he has co-chaired for seven years. He spoke movingly of how he has felt nourished and uplifted by the fellowship and by the discussions, as the group thanked him for his gracious service. At another moment, during our reflections on the IARCCUM section (paragraph 101) on attending each other's Eucharistic celebrations, we looked again at the “rules” for celebrating Eucharist together while our two churches remain in less than full communion. In our own practice, Anglican and Roman Catholic Eucharistic presidency alternates, and those from the other tradition stay in their seats at communion time. IARCCUM recommends that non-communicants approach the celebrant for a blessing. We decided to add that to our own practice. The dialogue affirmed the need for its own members to remain subject to the discipline of each church, in spite of the pain of not being able to receive sacramental communion at each others' hands after years of friendship and shared theological work.

The next meeting of the Dialogue will be held in the Toronto area September 16—18, 2007.