

The current crisis in the Anglican Communion –
what are the ecclesiological issues involved?

In his classic account of Anglican ecclesiology, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, Michael Ramsey makes the point that the way that the Christian Church is ordered is theologically significant because it is an outward expression of the Gospel. In his words:

The outward order of the Church therefore is no indifferent matter; it is on the contrary, of supreme importance since it is found to be related to the Church's inner meaning and to the Gospel of God itself. For the good news that God has visited and redeemed His people includes the redeemed man's knowledge of death and resurrection through his place in the one visible society and through the death to self in which every member and group has died. And in telling of this one visible society the Church's outward order tells indeed of the Gospel. For every part of the Church's true order will bear witness to the one universal family of God and will point to the historic events of the Word-made-flesh. Thus Baptism is into the death and resurrection of Christ, and into the one Body (Rom 6:3, 1 Cor 12:13); the Eucharist is likewise a sharing in Christ's death and merging of the individual into the one Body (1 Cor 11:26, 1 Cor 10:17); and the Apostles are both a link with the historical Jesus and also the officers of the one ecclesia whereon every local community depends. Hence the whole structure of the Church tells of the Gospel; not only by its graces and virtues, but also by its mere organic shape it proclaims the truth. A baptism, a Eucharistic service, an Apostle, in themselves tell us of our death and resurrection and of the Body which is one.¹

From the end of the first century onwards the dual function of the Apostles to which Ramsey refers in this quotation came to be exercised by the bishops.

It was the responsibility of the bishops to maintain the link with the historical Jesus by ensuring that the Apostolic testimony to Him was passed down whole and uncorrupted from one generation of the Church to the next. This was a point emphasised by St. Irenaeus and by Tertullian in the context of the Church's struggle with Gnosticism. They appealed to the unbroken succession of bishops originating with the Apostles themselves as the guarantee that Catholic orthodoxy rather than Gnosticism represented the authentic form of the Christian faith.²

It was also the responsibility of the bishops to maintain the unity of the Church. This not only meant acting as the focus of unity in their own churches (a point made repeatedly in the letters of St. Ignatius in the early second century)³ but also acting, in Ramsey's words, as the 'officers of the one ecclesia' by acting as the link between the churches thus manifesting and maintaining the unity of the Catholic Church as a

¹ M Ramsey *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* 2ed London: SPCK 1990 p.50

² See Irenaeus *Against Heresies* III:1-4, Tertullian *On Prescription against Heretics* XXXII

³ See for example Ignatius of Antioch *Epistle to the Ephesians* 4-6 and *Epistle to the Magnesians* 4-7

whole. The role of the bishop in this regard is explained as follows in the report *Bishops in Communion* produced by the House of Bishops of the Church of England:

In keeping contact and communication with the leaders of other worshipping communities on his people's behalf, the bishop has been the person, in every age, who has held together the local community with other Christian communities. Through the ordination of deacons and presbyters into catholic order and especially through the consecration of bishops. Christian communities remain constantly in touch with one another throughout the Church. So the bishop holds in unity the local church with every other local church with which it is in communion.⁴

In order to function in this way a bishop has to be accepted as a bishop of the Catholic Church by other bishops. In the Patristic period this recognition took the form of other bishops either attending the consecration of a new bishop in person or signifying their consent that the consecration should proceed and the ratification of the appointment by the bishop who was the Metropolitan of the ecclesiastical province concerned. For example, Canon IV of the Council of Nicaea in 325 declares:

It is by all means proper that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops in the province; but should this be difficult, either on account of urgent necessity or because of distance, three at least should meet together, and the suffrages of the absent [bishops] also being given and communicated in writing, then the ordination should take place. But in every province the ratification of what is done should be left to the Metropolitan.⁵

At the Reformation the reformed Church of England insisted that its orders of ministry remained those which had existed in the Catholic Church from the time of the Apostles. In the famous words of the Preface to the Ordinal, the Church of England believed that:

It is evident to all men diligently reading Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, Priests and Deacons.

and its intention was that; '...these Orders may be continued and reverently used and esteemed.'

In the case of bishops what this meant was that the Church of England intended that its bishops should be bishops of the Catholic Church ('a Bishop in the Church of God' as the Ordinal in the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it) and in order to signify that this was the case it was scrupulous in its adherence to the pattern for the consecration of bishops laid down in the Nicene Canon. Thus Matthew Parker was consecrated as Elizabeth I's first Archbishop of Canterbury on December 17 1559 by four bishops and all subsequent consecrations involved at least three bishops and the consent of the Archbishop of Canterbury or York as the Metropolitan of the province concerned.

⁴ *Bishops in Communion* London: CHP 2000 p.12

⁵ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2nd series Volume XIV Edinburgh & Grand Rapids: T&T Clark/Eerdmans 1997 p.11

The decision of the 16th century Church of England to adhere to the Nicene pattern set a precedent that has continued to be followed by the churches of the Anglican Communion. For example Canon C2 of the Canons of the Church of England, 'Of the Consecration of Bishops,' states:

No person shall be consecrated to the office of bishop by fewer than three bishops present together and joining in the act of consecration, of whom one shall be the archbishop of the province or a bishop appointed to act on his behalf.

Similar Canons exist in the other provinces of the Communion and the significant point about their existence is that they are not simply arbitrary forms of ecclesiological conservatism. Precisely as at the English Reformation, they are an expression of the belief that Anglican bishops are not just bishops of the local Anglican churches to which they belong, but bishops of the whole Church of God. In the present divided state of the Christian Church it is impossible for Anglican bishops to receive universal ecumenical recognition (Anglican orders are not officially recognised by the Roman Catholic Church, for example), but the way that Anglican bishops are consecrated is meant to ensure that they will receive recognition from the other churches of the Communion and from the churches which they are in communion, such as the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, the Philippine Independent Church, the Mar Thoma Syrian church of Malabar and the Lutheran churches of the Porvoo agreement.

When someone is consecrated as a bishop two things have to occur in order for a valid consecration to occur. There has to be a proper outward form. That is to say, there has to be a laying on of hands with prayer by the consecrating bishops. There also has to be a proper intention. That is to say, there has to be the intention to consecrate a bishop of the Catholic Church.

This means that the person who is being consecrated must be someone who will be able to uphold the Apostolic teaching, act as a focus for unity within the local church and link the local church to the wider Church of which it is a part. If it is known in advance that someone would be unable to fulfil these criteria then it would be impossible for those consecrating to act with the intention that they should do so. As a consequence the consecration would be invalid due to what is known as a 'defect of intention' and the person consecrated could not be regarded as a bishop.

For instance, it would be impossible validly to ordain someone who was known to be an atheist because those consecrating could not be acting with the intention that the person being consecrated would uphold the Apostolic faith and teach others to do so.

In the case of the consecration of Canon Gene Robinson as coadjutor bishop of New Hampshire on 2 November 2003 it can be argued that there was a defect of intention and that as a result the consecration was invalid and Robinson cannot be regarded as a bishop.

To understand why this is the case it is necessary to note the statement issued by the Primates of the Anglican Communion, including the Presiding Bishop of ECUSA,

Archbishop Frank Griswold on 16 October 2003. This stated that if the consecration of Canon Robinson were to proceed:

...the ministry of this one bishop will not be recognised by most of the Anglican world, and many provinces are likely to consider themselves to be out of communion with the Episcopal Church (USA). This will tear the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level, and may lead to further division on this and further issues as provinces have to decide in consequence whether they can remain in communion with provinces that choose not to break communion with the Episcopal Church (USA).⁶

This statement can be read as a declarative statement ('what will happen') or as a predictive statement ('what is likely to happen'). In either case it is clear that those who consecrated Canon Robinson, including Archbishop Griswold, must have been aware that they were consecrating someone who would either certainly, or very probably, be unable to carry out the ministry of a bishop by linking the diocese of New Hampshire and the Episcopal Church (USA) to the wider Anglican Communion. On the contrary it was either certain, or very probable, that his consecration would lead to the breaking of the links that already existed.

It follows that although the form of Canon Robinson's consecration was canonical since he was appointed according to the constitution of the Episcopal Church (USA) and consecrated by three bishops with the consent of the Metropolitan, there must have been a defect of intention since those consecrating could not have been acting with the reasonable expectation that they were consecrating someone who could act as a bishop of the Catholic Church. It follows that the consecration should be regarded as invalid and that the see of New Hampshire should be regarded as vacant.

Recognition that Canon Robinson was never properly consecrated suggests a possible way forward out of the crisis currently facing the Anglican Communion because of the actions of the Episcopal Church (USA).

First of all it means that Canon Robinson could not be invited to the Lambeth Conference in 2008 since he is not a bishop and this would avoid the problems that an invitation to him would raise.

Secondly, with the agreement of the other Primates of the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church (USA) could be invited by the Archbishop of Canterbury to fill the see of New Hampshire with an acceptable bishop and to censure those bishops who were involved in his consecration on the grounds that they took part in a consecration that they must have known was invalid.

Failure to take this action within an agreed time frame could then be regarded as a sign that the Episcopal Church (USA) no longer regarded itself as part of the Anglican Communion. The reasons would be that the Episcopal Church had taken action that it knew would lead to a breaking of communion with other churches of the Communion and had refused to rectify the situation when given the opportunity to do so, and that it

⁶ *A Statement by the Primates of the Anglican Communion meeting in Lambeth Palace ACNS 3633 16 October 2003 p.2*

had refused to take notice of decisions agreed collectively by the bishops of the Communion both at the Lambeth Conference 1998 and at subsequent Primates' meetings.

As Resolution 49 of the Lambeth Conference of 1930 declares, the Anglican Communion is a fellowship of churches that:

...are bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the bishops in conference.⁷

If a church decides to reject the common counsel of the bishops in conference it follows that it has decided to act in a way that is incompatible with the mutual loyalty referred to in the resolution. To put the same thing in more theological terms, that church has refused to act as a church by living according to the pattern of death and resurrection referred to by Ramsey, in which each Christian individually, and each local church collectively, dies to their own desires and preferences and enters into a new life that is shaped by the requirements of membership of the body of Christ as a whole.

In this new way of life independence is replaced by interdependence⁸ and it is within this context that the question of provincial autonomy needs to be considered. It is true that the Anglican tradition has stressed the importance of the concept of provincial autonomy in response to what has been seen as the over centralised approach of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the acceptance of provincial autonomy has never been unqualified. For example, Resolution 48 of the Lambeth Conference of 1930 stated that:

The Conference affirms that the true constitution of the Catholic Church involves the principle of the autonomy of particular Churches based upon a common faith and order.⁹

What we see in this quotation is that the affirmation of provincial autonomy is balanced by the fact that this autonomy is seen as being the autonomy of churches that share a common faith and order. This common faith and order limits the autonomy that these churches possess. Thus in terms of Anglican theology a province is not free to reject the authority of the Bible or to dispense with the dominical sacraments, the Catholic creeds or the historic episcopate. To do so would be to repudiate its identity as part of the Anglican Communion.

In similar fashion it can be argued that the autonomy of an Anglican province does not extend to taking a course of action, such as the consecration of an openly gay bishop, that has been rejected by the Anglican Communion as whole. This is because such an action would, as we have said, amount to an implicit refusal to live as part of the Communion and, as such, would be an example of the kind of abuse of freedom at

⁷ R Coleman (eds) *Resolutions of the Lambeth Conferences 1867-1988* Toronto: Anglican Book Centre 1992 p. 84

⁸ I Cor 12: 12-26

⁹ Ibid p.83

the expense of the unity of the Church criticised by St. Paul in a number of his letters.¹⁰

If it was considered that the Episcopal Church (USA) had repudiated its Anglican identity, the way would then be open for the Communion, through the Primates' meeting, to ask the Archbishop Canterbury to re-establish the Anglican Church in the United States by appointing bishops to form the nucleus of new church that was part of the Communion.

There are three responses that are commonly made to the kind of criticisms of the actions of the Episcopal Church (USA) outlined above.

The first response is to say that the threat to unity has been caused not by the actions of the Episcopal Church but by those other provinces of the Communion who have been unwilling to accept what the Episcopal Church has done. The problem with this argument is that ignores the principle set out by St. Paul that a Christian is not free to take a course of action that he or she thinks is permissible if this course of action will be a stumbling block for another Christian.¹¹ As Professor Anthony Thiselton comments, according to St. Paul:

Rather than seeking to demonstrate some individualist assertion of freedom or even victory, love seeks the welfare of the other. Hence if 'the strong' express love, they will show active concern that 'the weak' are not precipitated into situations of bad conscience, remorse, unease or stumbling....Rather the one who *loves* the other will consider the effect of his or her own attitudes or actions upon 'weaker' brothers and sisters.¹²

What this mean is that the burden of responsibility lies with the 'strong' and not with the 'weak'. In the present instance it follows that, even if the Episcopal Church (USA) believed that the consecration of a practising homosexual was a theologically legitimate step to take, the demands of Christian love mean that they should have refrained from taking it out of respect for the consciences of those Anglicans who could not accept such an action.

The second response is to say that it is a missiological necessity for the Episcopal Church (USA) to support the ministry of practising homosexuals because only by acting in an 'inclusive' fashion can it continue to engage in effective outreach to gay and lesbian people. There are two problems with this response.

(a) This argument from missiological necessity was presented to both the Lambeth Conference in 1998 and the Primates' Meeting in October 2003. On both occasions the vast majority of the bishops present did not find this argument convincing, and, this being the case, it was incumbent on the Episcopal Church to accept the collective decision of the bishops about the matter and not to proceed with the consecration of Canon Robinson.

¹⁰ Rom 15:1-6, 1 Cor 1:10-17, 8:1-14:38, Eph 4:1-6, Phil 2:1-11

¹¹ Rom 14:1-15:6, 1 Cor 8:1-13

¹² A C Thiselton *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* Grand Rapids & Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster 2000 pp. 622-3

(b) Any missiological gains in the United States have to be balanced by the missiological problems caused by the actions of the Episcopal Church in Africa and South East Asia where the suggestion that Anglican Christians accept homosexuality has caused very serious problems in relations with Islam. The mutual responsibility of the members of the body of Christ means that it is not legitimate to seek to obtain missiological advantage for ourselves if this will damage the mission of Christians elsewhere in the world.

The third response is to say that at the Reformation the English Reformers acted unilaterally in pursuit of what they thought was right even though this damaged the unity of the Church. If it was right for them to do this it must also be right for Anglicans today to follow their example.

The problem with this argument is that it overlooks three key points made, for example, by Bishop John Jewel in his classic *Apology for the Church of England*. The first point that Jewel makes is that Rome had broken the unity of the Church by its doctrinal and ecclesiological innovations and what the Church of England had done was to restore unity with the ancient and undivided Church of the early centuries by doing away with these innovations. The second point that Jewel makes is that the Church of England had to act because the central issue underlying the Reformation was the issue of human salvation and it was not possible to hesitate on this issue. The final point that he makes is that there was no realistic prospect of a free council of the Church at which the Protestant viewpoint would obtain a fair hearing and so unilateral action was unavoidable.

In the present case none of these points apply. No one can reasonably argue that the traditional position on human sexuality is an innovation that marks a deviation from the teaching of the undivided Church. Nor can anyone claim that the consecration of Canon Robinson was a matter of salvation. No one's soul would have been imperilled if he had not been consecrated. Finally, no one can claim that the supporters of the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy have not had the opportunity to have their case heard in the councils of the Anglican Communion. Their arguments have been given a fair hearing, but they have been rejected. It follows that it cannot be said that there is a good analogy between the actions of the Episcopal Church (USA) and those of the English Reformers.

Given that these responses are unconvincing for the reasons just given, the case against the actions of the Episcopal Church (USA) outlined earlier in this paper remains solid. Furthermore, this case also applies *mutatis mutandis* to the proposal before the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada that it should authorise Canadian dioceses to introduce the blessing of same sex relationships should they wish to do so.

Having warned of the consequences of the consecration of Gene Robinson, the Primates' meeting in October 2003 noted that: 'Similar considerations apply to the situation pertaining in the Diocese of New Westminster.'¹³ What this means is that the Primates considered that the decision by the Canadian diocese of New Westminster to

¹³ *A Statement by the Primates of the Anglican Communion meeting in Lambeth Palace p.2*

authorise the blessing of lesbian and gay relationships represented a similar threat to the unity of the Anglican Communion

This being the case, any decision by the Canadian General Synod to authorise same sex blessings more widely would be a decision to ignore the warning of the Primates as to the damage that such a decision would cause. Such a decision might be constitutionally valid but it could never be theologically valid because, as in the case of the decision to consecrate Canon Robinson, it would mean privileging the exercise of autonomy over the maintenance of communion. It would mean refusing to die to self in order to live as part of the wider Church.

Should the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada decide to take such an un-Catholic action it should be requested to reconsider it within a specified period of time. If it refused to do so, this should be regarded as sign that the Canadian Church had decided to place itself outside the Anglican Communion.

As we have suggested in the case of the Episcopal Church (USA), the Archbishop of Canterbury could then be asked to take the necessary steps to ensure that Anglican Church life in Canada continued by appointing bishops who could form the basis of a church that remained part of the Anglican Communion.

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