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Full Communion with other Episcopal Churches

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1 'Full Communion' normally means a relationship between two distinct and autonomous ecclesial communities, generally located in different geographical areas, of such a nature that

a) each communion recognizes the catholicity and independence of the other and maintains its own, and each believes the other to hold the essentials of the Christian faith;

b) subject to letters of recommendation or such other safeguards as local discipline may properly require, members of the one ecclesial body may receive the sacraments of the other;

c) bishops of the one church may take part, if invited, in the consecration of bishops of the other;

d) subject to provincial canon and episcopal licence, a bishop, presbyter, or deacon of one ecclesial body may exercise liturgical functions in a congregation of the other body if invited to do so. (In such cases commendatory letters from the home diocese and metropolitan would be expected as customary in case of doubt, and visiting clergy are not understood to possess rights in respect of liturgical functions.¹ On the other hand, it is also normal for such an invitation to be given.)

If the full communion established on these understandings is to be fruitful for the churches concerned, and not only for individuals on their travels, then it is also a desirable addition and complement that

e) there should be recognized organs of consultation with a view to common action, both for mutual aid and also lest one body needlessly embarks on a course which causes embarrassment or pain to the sister church.

To be in communion with others is necessarily both an enhancing of the corporate strength of the churches in love, and also a restraining of individualism or subjectivism. But it inheres in the relationship of full communion that

i) the two bodies remain autonomous and fraternal, without elevation of the one to be judge of the other and without mutual insensitivity;

ii) the two bodies remain themselves without either being committed to every secondary feature of the traditions of the other, and without necessarily embarking on conversations directed towards establishing organic union. (Organic union would be appropriate

and necessary if the ecclesial bodies already in full communion are, or come to be, immediately adjacent in the same geographical area and speak the same language, in which case they should seek to become a single visible fellowship and eschew the indulgence of parallel episcopal jurisdictions.)

2 The churches and provinces of the Anglican Communion are in simple unqualified communion with one another in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Christ through the communion of the bishops of each province with the see of Canterbury. In this respect (not always in his juridical authority) the Archbishop of Canterbury exercises functions that can be described as 'patriarchal', inasmuch as the see's position as touchstone of communion transcends the boundaries of the province of which the Archbishop is metropolitan. In the 1860s this mutual relationship between churches of the Anglican Communion was usually described by the word 'intercommunion'. But by the end of the nineteenth century this last term was undergoing a modification of its meaning, and was coming to be employed of the possible future relationship between the Anglican Communion and churches which do not look to the see of Canterbury as their centre or touchstone of fellowship and sacramental sharing. Today we would simply use the unadorned noun 'communion' to describe the mutual relations of the various churches and provinces of the Anglican Communion with one another and with the see of Canterbury.

3 At the present time (1980) full communion exists between churches of the Anglican Communion and the Old Catholics, the Polish National Catholic Church, USA, the Philippine Independent Church, the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church, the Lusitanian Church, the United Churches of North India, South India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. However, with the acceptance of the application by the Lusitanian Church and the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church for full integration into the Anglican Communion, these churches will cease to be distinct and independent bodies and it will now be more correct to speak of them as being 'in communion' rather than in full communion with the see of Canterbury and the Anglican Communion.

4 Full communion implies the distinctness of the ecclesial bodies which enter into this relationship. On the other hand, the relationship is much closer than that implied by the ambiguous term 'intercommunion'.² Today intercommunion is often found to be a word capable of generating misunderstandings, and proposals to establish it can have the reverse effect to that intended. In many contexts (not all) the word now signifies an authorized or unauthorized freedom of

eucharistic sharing, apart from serious intention to seek either organic union or full communion, and in an explicit or implicit disregard of doctrinal differences which exist or are widely believed to exist between the ecclesial bodies concerned. Those who advocate it normally hold that if the unity of all baptized believers in Christ is already something given—not a goal to be striven for by strenuous ecumenical negotiation between the separate institutional forms within which and under which the true invisible church of Christ lies hidden—then the eucharist is a divinely given means of making this already given unity more visible. This understanding of the theology of intercommunion presupposes that doctrinal differences between ecclesial bodies are not at the level of faith, but rather at that of school theological tradition, and can be disregarded. It also assumes that the quest for either organic or full communion by seeking to express e.g. common eucharistic faith, is misguided from the start and begins from mistaken premisses.

5 The acceptance of very precise formulae concerning the eucharistic action is not a prerequisite for full communion or intercommunion, and thus far this position is non-controversial. But there are other respects in which the position described provokes vigorous dissent. It runs the minor risk of encouraging the celebration of the eucharist as primarily an expression of mutual good will; that is, as more a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, than an explicit sacrament of our redemption in which those who rightly receive in faith truly partake of the body and blood of Christ.³ It runs the major risk of implying that the Lord's intention for his church is to have a large number of diverse ecclesial bodies, all of which are equally valid or invalid expressions of his will for his people, with the consequence that the painful realities of division and group rivalry are ignored or condoned. In other words, this theology of intercommunion, which begins with a powerful, well-based proposition that the church of Christ must be one, and goes on to offer an attractively short cut to the desired destination, can end by merely adding to the causes of divisiveness. For to many this theology presupposes a relativistic or sceptical doctrine that Christ's holy catholic church subsists in a multitude of churchly groups, all equally right or equally wrong, none of which mirrors or approximates to the intended form of the unique apostolic community. It is therefore asking Orthodox and Catholic minds to purge themselves of precisely the theme which the ecumenical movement most looks to them to affirm, namely, that unity is of the very esse of the church, and that the catholic ordering of ministry and sacraments is a providential instrument to this end. If this analysis is correct, we need look no further to find an explanation why some past proposals for intercommunion, without more ado or by a stated date, have turned out to offer a

singularly ineffective road towards the establishment of communion and fellowship in the sacrament of our redemption.

6 The Anglican Communion has profoundly valued the visible continuity of the ministry, a continuity which receives classical affirmation in the preface to the Ordinal of 1661. Without passing negative judgement on non-episcopal ministries (whose spiritual reality and effectiveness may be positively affirmed as God's remedy for the shortcomings of the historic order), the Anglican tradition has consistently prized the preservation of the links in the historic chain which makes the episcopate the sign and instrument of unity and universality in the church. This ministry, with its apostolic commission, is seen as a divinely appointed organ which acts in relation to the whole body in Christ's name, and which represents the priestly service of the whole body in its common worship. To propose full communion with ecclesial bodies which do not wish to share this ministry, would therefore be felt to threaten a principle and a practice of some importance in Anglican history and theology. For the bishop is a focus of the unity of the church by virtue of his commission, and acute problems arise if the celebrant at the eucharist is not, and does not wish to be, a member of the body which, through the bishop, and through the celebration of the eucharist, is expressing its visible unity in faith and life with the whole church. This point should not be represented as if episcopacy is the article of faith by which the church stands or falls, or as if it is the only possible instrument of unity; still less an infallible guarantee against the incidence of schism. The claim is not being made that the episcopate is of the being of the church in the sense that it is constitutive in the same way and on the same plane as the sacraments of baptism or eucharist or the true proclamation of God's Word. But unity and universality are of the church's very being. God intends pastoral care for his people in truth, unity, mission, and holiness. And the episcopal ministry in due succession and apostolic commission is the immemorial tradition of the catholic church, through which we accept as self-evident the authorized ministry of word and sacrament in the communion of faith, and therefore is also a providential instrument of the true marks of the church as a visible society in history.

7 If the whole church of Christ were one, communion would not need to be qualified by any adjective. We would not need to speak of communion as full or partial, perfect or imperfect, or inter- or any other qualification or prefix. The ancient churches enjoyed simple communion with one another in a single fellowship of faith, bound together by the churches of apostolic foundation, and those who passed outside this fellowship were held to be in schism from the unique orthodox catholic church with its ordered succession of

ministry. At the present time this understanding of communion retains prominent advocates, especially among Orthodox theologians. With its roots in the conviction that the universal church is primarily a fellowship of local churches (i.e. the dioceses under their bishops) gathered in eucharistic communion with one another, this is an understanding of universal communion which is deeply congenial to the Anglican tradition, and there is a living heritage here from the early church which remains full of power. The eucharist has an eminent place among the constitutive elements of the church. It is natural to Anglicans to see the Eucharist (on the ground that it is the memorial in which the benefits of Christ's passion are made actual to believing communicants and for the whole church, and at the same time the true gift of the very presence of Christ on whom we feed in our hearts by faith) as the effective sign of the one body in Christ in the unity of the church, and therefore an anticipation of the ultimate triumph of the glory of God. To refuse or to withdraw from participation in the sacrament, through which the unity of the church is effected as a concrete reality, is an exquisitely painful denial of everything we understand to be the Lord's intention for his people.

8 Nevertheless Christendom is divided, and epithets and prefixes and qualifications to communion are found necessary. Roman Catholic theologians have found it necessary to distinguish between perfect and imperfect communion, the latter term being applied to the relations between Rome and Orthodoxy. Between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, described as 'sister churches' in the Joint Declaration of Pope Paul VI and the Oecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras on 28 October 1967, there is at present no full communion established. These two great bodies recognize without reservation the enormous extent of their common beliefs, together with the validity of each other's ministry and sacraments. There is no questioning of the authentic succession or of the shared nature of the eucharistic faith of these churches. In certain limited circumstances, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches are able to exercise 'economy' and to allow the controlled admission to eucharistic communion of individuals of the other body when distant from their own priests. (Individual Anglicans have been similarly granted the sacraments by both bodies.) Yet a barrier is felt to hinder the practice which Anglicans are accustomed to call 'reciprocal inter-communion'; that is, the occasional and reciprocal sharing in the eucharist by members of churches which are seeking perfect or full communion with one another. For this is a corporate action by churches, going beyond the pastoral care of isolated individuals. And the reason for this sense of a barrier should merit respect: it is still felt on both sides that there is not as yet a genuine unity of understanding in regard to the status of the *Filioque*, which the West added

to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, or of the Roman Catholic faith in the universal primatial jurisdiction of the Roman see as defined by Vatican I in 1870.

9 Between the Anglican Communion and the Orthodox churches the bonds are deep and powerful. Works of Orthodox spirituality are widely and gratefully studied by many Anglicans. Both bodies share the concept of the universal church as subsisting in the eucharistic communion of the several local churches through their bishops. It is natural there should be a strong impulse towards the quest for full communion. The Orthodox churches have expressed vigorous regret at the decision of some Anglican provinces to admit women to the priesthood, and it is to be expected that, if a concordat of communion were to be achieved, Anglican women priests would certainly not be permitted to exercise liturgical functions in Orthodox churches (as of course they are already not allowed to do in some provinces of the Anglican Communion, this tolerance of diversity of custom being an effective condition required by the Lambeth Conference of 1978). Furthermore, the Orthodox churches would evidently wish to see the churches of the Anglican Communion proceeding more forcibly towards the omission of the offending *Filioque* from the creed. Its omission at the enthronement of Archbishop Runcie in March 1980 may be taken as programmatic. The doctrine contained in the *Filioque* is ancient tradition in the theology of the Latin West, found already in Hilary and Ambrose and therefore antedating the creed of the council of Constantinople of 381, at which the West was not actually represented, though it later acknowledged the council to have ecumenical status. To affirm that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son was felt by Augustine to be necessary to protect the doctrine of the unity of the holy Trinity from Arian attack. In the doctrine of the *Filioque*, the Latin West had nothing it needs to apologize for. But it was a medieval mistake unilaterally to insert it into the ecumenical creed used at the eucharist.

Note should be taken of the fact that the Orthodox churches were at least in some degree surprised when the ARCIC Venice statement on authority appeared, in which responsible Anglican theologians expressed willingness to envisage a universal primacy in the see of Rome (autocracy set aside), nothing having been said of this by the Anglican theologians participating in the Anglican/Orthodox conversations at the time of the Moscow declaration and statement. Orthodox antipathy to papal claims is usually deeper, and more eloquently expressed, than that of Anglicans of strongly Protestant sympathies.

10 Between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church, steps towards full communion may be very difficult, but are

at least much easier to consider than a move towards intercommunion, a term which Roman Catholics commonly understand to imply indifferentism. Inasmuch as full communion presupposes a continuing distinctness of identity and tradition within the ecclesial bodies concerned, the principle is not obviously alien to Roman Catholic thinking: it has an evident analogy to uniat status, under which ecclesial bodies may be united with the communion of the Church of St Peter and St Paul without being absorbed. The preservation of local and provincial autonomy, subject to the brotherly preservation of charity and mutual respect, is highly valued in the Anglican Communion. Central direction in matters of detail, that should be decided locally, would not be understood or welcomed. The formal decision of 1896 that Anglican Orders are null and void remains officially in force (with consequences recently renewed in vigour) and offers an insuperable barrier to corporate reconciliation, as at the time was avowedly intended by its principal promoters. Anglicans, who find themselves suspected on the Protestant side of being a diabolical conspiracy to undermine the sixteenth-century Reformation, find themselves regarded from the Roman Catholic side as a diabolical counterfeit for the real thing. Lying beyond the popular 'gut reaction' of non-rational instinctive hostility—largely confined to geographical areas where Roman Catholics and Anglicans work side by side sometimes (happily not always)⁴ with the sense of being opposing camps with contrasting independent cultures, whose mutual coexistence is embittered by Roman Catholic rules concerning mixed marriages—there lies a substantial fear that, if Roman authority were to admit the validity of Anglican Orders, this might run the risk of strengthening a notion extremely unwelcome to Roman Catholics: namely, that the Anglican Communion is in will and deed an alternative and rival Catholicism which, because it has no central organ of control but works through a diffused authority and general consensus, is visibly less inhospitable to liberal humanist reinterpretations of divine revelation and to relativist ideas that in faith and morals nothing is too certain, and, in short, is open to compromise with modern paganism as authentic Catholicism is not. Anglicans will not be happy to recognize themselves under this description, but it is important for those negotiating with Roman Catholic authority to realize that this is how we can at times seem to appear. It may be predicted with reasonable confidence that Rome is unlikely to reconsider and to revoke the 1896 judgement on Anglican Orders if this single issue is to be considered as an item in isolation, even though the ARCIC Windsor and Canterbury statements on *Eucharist and Ministry*, with their subsequent *Elucidations*, are documents free of ambiguity, in which both Catholics and Anglicans recognize their faith and which therefore have, in passing, the unintended side-effect of destroying the central argument of *Apostolicae Curae* (1896), viz.

that Roman Catholics and Anglicans are committed to essentially different beliefs about the eucharistic presence and sacrifice and consequently about the nature and office of ministerial priesthood. (*Apostolicae Curae* does not actually deny the preservation of the episcopal succession, Louis Duchesne's submission to the papal commission being decisively positive,⁵ but treats this as an outward fact whose value is reduced to zero by a Protestant theology of ministry and sacraments.)

11 If the ground for reluctance to reopen the question of Anglican Orders is the fear of a rival Catholicism, the Anglican Communion through its central councils may well wish to explore ways of meeting this not unreasonable apprehension by asking Rome if, and on what terms, full communion may be made possible between the chair of St Peter and St Paul and the chair of St Augustine; or whether it is now scarcely realistic to hope and pray with Pope Paul VI (25 October 1970) that, without lessening the proper tradition of spirituality and piety characteristic of Anglican usage, the day may come when the Roman Catholic Church may be willing and able to embrace its 'beloved sister', the Anglican Communion, in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ. It should be possible to ascertain, informally, if and when and in what form the question could be acceptably and profitably put. But first, no doubt, it would be for the Anglican Communion, in the light of the reaction of its several provinces to the progress marked in the successive ARCIC statements,⁶ to decide that it wants to explore this possibility. One thing seems certain: it will be misleading and lacking in integrity to hope for a recognition of Anglican Orders unless we also wish the Archbishop of Canterbury to be in full communion with the church where the apostles Peter and Paul taught and died.

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NOTES

- 1 Among the provinces of the Anglican Communion, the present position is that there are differences of discipline concerning the admission of women priests to celebrate outside their own diocese or province. If fraternal relations between bodies in full communion are to be maintained, similar rules must evidently be in force in the wider context.
- 2 Reference should be made to the report of the English Bishops' Commission, *Intercommunion Today*, (CIO, London 1968), which is a distinguished analysis of the problem.
- 3 This position is censured in Article 28 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England, whose language is echoed in this sentence.

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- 4 In many places relations are highly amicable, notably in regions where the uninitiated might not expect this, such as the diocese of Sydney.
- 5 For Duchesne's opinion, cf. Bruno Neveu, '*Mgr Duchesne et Son Memoire sur les Ordinations Anglicanes (1895 ou 1896)*', *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 29, 1978, pp.443-82. At a popular level it is still common for Roman Catholics to express the belief that, until such time as the see of Rome declares Anglican ministry valid, there is nothing but illusion in Anglican faith in the reality of Christ's presence and grace in the sacraments. One does not hear this, of course, from theologians.
- 6 The Windsor (*Eucharistic Doctrine*, SPCK, London 1971) and Canterbury (*Ministry and Ordination*, SPCK, London 1973) statements have generally been welcomed, except by critics looking for the comfort of familiar formulae. The Venice statement (*Authority in the Church*, CTS/SPCK, London 1977) has attracted more vocal complaints: a) from conservative Roman Catholics for its inductive rather than deductive approach to primacy; b) from liberal Anglicans for its assumption that Anglicans believe in divine revelation; c) from readers who have wondered why the four difficulties listed in para.24 of the Venice statement are thought to constitute a sufficient obstacle to communion (if indeed they are). The suggestion that the statement does not uphold the supreme authority of Scripture is irreconcilable with the text of the document, unless supreme means exclusive.