

The Anglican Covenant and a Sound Balance between the Church's Structural and Spiritual Dimension

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1. Vatican I and Chicago-Lambeth-Quadrilateral as Responses to 19th Century Challenges

Reflecting on the Church's history in terms of life and doctrine, one discerns a rather common pattern, whether it concerns ecumenical councils in the first five so-called Christian centuries, medieval councils like Lateran IV, Florence or Constance or even expressions of confessional state during Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Almost every declaration and definition is a reaction to life, mostly to something that has gone 'wrong', i.e. different from what Tradition expected or prescribed. Doctrine reflects internal and/or external challenges, and then usually reaffirms what has been said up to then, reacting in a rather defensive way. Doctrinal definitions rarely look forward, motivate, let alone inspire

A rather telling example of this defensive way of defining doctrine is Vatican I, at least in what was possible as a council before the war between Germany and France brought it to an end, long before expected. Obviously, the council's story starts in the early 19th century with the children of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution shaping life and thought in Europe, forcing the Roman Catholic Church to react to all that. Failing to deal properly with democratic claims and enlightened thinking - mostly out of fear or ignorance, Ultramontanism in general and the curia as such took its refuge in declarations like the most prominent of 1854. Yet, the RC Church had to face ongoing discussions, eventually leading to the council 16 years after that.

Unfortunately or not, the council was left unfinished having produced *Pastor Aeternus* only, uncomplemented by any appropriate declaration about the bishops' role which then was not made until a century later in Vatican II. So Roman Catholicism had to make its way struggling onwards on rather rocky ground with all the internal and external consequences comprehensively described elsewhere.

Taking a look across the Atlantic Ocean, we see 19th-century Episcopalians struggling for an answer to the trauma of the American Civil War. They had experienced its devastating impact on a nation, split into two factions both of whom claimed to have God on their side, instead of asking whether they were on God's side. The dream first uttered by William Huntington - who by the way and quite crucially for his commitment enjoyed a marvellous companionship with his RC colleague across the street - was now to create a united church in the US, not only to bridge the gaps, but also to strengthen the Church's credibility for her mission's sake.¹ As many joined his dream as well as

¹ E.g. Ward 298-9

they recognized the need to pursue the way he encouraged them to, leading to the declaration of the Chicago-Lambeth-Quadrilateral, which still serves as a crucial yardstick of Anglican doctrine.

2. The Development of Instruments of Communion in the Anglican Communion

The fact that the Lambeth Conference in 1888 joined the Chicago declaration of 1886 is not only a pleasure to remember in that a theological accord between England and the US was achieved. It is also a reminder of an important stage of a process from an explicitly English Church with some overseas subjects to a worldwide Anglican Communion consisting of member churches who claim to be treated equally. In a wider view, we see progress from a colonial church to a genuinely polycentric communion², which of course requires appropriate instruments to keep the communion together. It is about a communion sharing faith, burdened by the question of authority. But how is this communion of faith to be sustained, in terms of cohesion and mutual affection?³

Though my main focus is on the AC's development after 1888, it is worth going back in history as the **Lambeth Conference**, one of the so-called instruments of communion⁴, had already come into existence by then and so, of course, was involved in the following process.

It is named after Lambeth Palace which hosted the first meeting that took place in 1867. It was initially requested by bishops of Canada, before Archbishop Longley called together Anglicans from all over the world.⁵ Since then the conference has been held approximately every decade and has always been a consultative body for the Archbishop and the provinces, the latter being autonomous and not subject to any other church. So Lambeth Conference does not legislate, make binding decisions or exert power in the name of the AC.⁶ As the number of participants has been growing, the conference has moved to Canterbury, meeting both in Christ Church Cathedral and the University in 2008.

In planning the conference, the Archbishop is assisted by a steering group of appointed staff members, many people at Canterbury, the Anglican Communion Office, Church House and more. The Secretary General of the Anglican Communion serves as the secretary of the conference with a

² Duraisingh 363

³ Thomas 119-20

⁴ Approving the Windsor Report's suggestion the Anglican Consultative Council in 2005 decided to call them rather Instruments of Unity, including the Archbishop of Canterbury (<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/communion/acc/meetings/acc13/resolutions.cfm#s2>).

⁵ Butler 41-2; Shriver 210; Pickering 405-6

⁶ Pickering 406

designated Conference Manager.⁷

Following a resolution of the 1968 conference⁸ an **Anglican Consultative Council** was created which would act as a more permanent advisory body and came into being - accepted by the general synods or conventions of all the Member Churches of the Anglican Communion - in October 1969. The Lambeth Conference had seen the need for more frequent and more representative exchange and consultation than a once-a-decade conference of bishops.⁹

The ACC, whose president is the Archbishop of Canterbury, can rightly be seen as the most representative body of gathered Anglicans amongst the Instruments of Communion. It includes members of the laity, bishops, priests, deacons and religious, appointed or elected by their province for a maximum of three meetings, or six years, whichever is longer, or for such shorter period as the appointing body shall determine.

The Council's meetings have now taken place in various provinces, by invitation every two to three years, thirteen times. The ACC has byelaws and a constitution, and through its networks and programmes seeks to serve the varying needs of its member churches on an international scale.¹⁰

About 10 years later, another institution focussing on unity and communion was added to LC and ACC. Following a suggestion in 1978 from the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan, the **Primates' Meeting** was as an opportunity for "leisurely thought, prayer and deep consultation" and its first meeting was held in 1979.¹¹

Even this short description of the successive establishment of the three institutions highlights once more the transformation Anglicanism has undergone in the 20th century as well as how the Anglican Communion has tried to cope with that process in terms of structure, i.e. institutionally, as well as in terms of being a multi-faceted spiritual communion.

3. RC Developments in Vatican II and afterwards

⁷ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/communion/index.cfm>

⁸ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/communion/acc/resources/docs/lambethresolution.cfm>

⁹ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/communion/acc/about.cfm>. Ward (302) sees the creation of the ACC, with clerical and lay as well as episcopal membership, as an attempt to develop 'robust forms of associations'. Cf. Shriver 211-2

¹⁰ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/communion/index.cfm>

¹¹ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/communion/primates/index.cfm>. Cf. Butler 50

As Vatican I had not had the chance to finish a definition on episcopacy complementing *Pastor Aeternus*, Vatican II was the more focussed on the bishop's and the bishops' role in church. One of its major issues therefore was reflecting on collegiality, yet shaped by what had been declared by *Pastor Aeternus*. The establishing of bishops' synods meeting in a certain rhythm in Rome and elsewhere in order to reflect on current issues together with pope and curia was one of its effects. But at the latest in the Eighties the role and competence of national or regional bishops' conferences became problematic, as the Vatican was leading an increasingly centralized approach, with bishops' conferences suffering. There is apparently a perception of a centre and a periphery, an understanding of unity created by uniformity.

A crucial and telling stage in all this development was the creation and establishing of the new Roman Catechism, i.e. the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was done in a rather rough discussion. Quite a number of bishops questioned the initiative as they held the view that in a world-wide church faith cannot be articulated in one (European) version only. This challenge was soundly rebuked by the Congregation of the Faith, whose then president today is bishop of Rome, the theologian in charge of the Italian edition Secretary of State, of the English the Congregation's president, of the German edition Cardinal of Vienna. Not to forget 'Youcat', the Catechism's 2010 version for the Youth.

Yet, it seems that Ratzinger's demand for unity through uniformity recently arrived at a major obstacle when trying to introduce the Third Edition of the Roman Missal in languages other than Latin. Making the liturgy uniform has now even been extended to detailed issues of grammar, with the guidelines for translation emphasizing that the foreign language should even follow the syntactic structures of the Latin version. This has led e.g. in Ireland and Germany to versions which are simply not comprehensible, let alone pastorally usable, and bishops' conferences have ultimately had to recall liturgical books previously ordered to be introduced. So however convincing or not the concept of keeping an ecclesiastical body together by implementing uniformity might be, there is definitely a point where it borders on absurdity, which leads us back to the question of how to live in communion or to keep unity in a church, especially a polycentric one like the Anglican Communion.

4. Failing Instruments of Communion and yet another one?

The Anglican Communion in the late 20th and early 21st century not only accepts and describes itself as a polycentric body, it is also a Church lacking (or enjoying the lack) of a central magisterium, and far from claiming to enjoy infallibility. This also limits the possibility to stop,

sanction or exclude discussions like the ones which have shaped the communion in the last decades, especially on women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopacy as well as homosexuals being ordained bishops.

The autonomy, sometimes virtual independence, which provinces enjoy has thus led a good part of them to make appropriate provisions enabling such ordinations, but has simultaneously given rise to tensions with others who have not found themselves in a position to act likewise. Details of all these processes have been outlined and discussed sufficiently elsewhere.

With ECUSA's consent to the election of Gene Robinson as bishop in 2003, the authorisation of a public Rite of Blessing for same sex unions by a diocese of the Anglican Church of Canada and the performance of episcopal functions by bishops in other provinces without the consent or approval of the incumbent bishop, it became obvious that a new stage had been reached and that Instruments of Communion had not been able to prevail. Even worse, provinces found themselves ready to break with ECUSA and others, raising the danger of a major split in the AC as such.

At the request of Anglican Primates in October 2003 Archbishop Rowan established the 'Lambeth Commission'. Its mandate spoke of the problems being experienced as a consequence of the above developments and the need to seek a common way forward within the Anglican Communion. It did not demand judgement by the Commission on sexuality issues. Rather, it requested consideration of ways in which communion and understanding could be enhanced where serious differences threatened the life of a diverse worldwide Church.

In 2004 the Commission produced the 'Windsor Report', which reviewed precedent developments and the state of the communion, before focussing on an intensive reflection on the concept of communion, a renaming of Instruments as *Instruments of Unity* and the proposal for an *Anglican Covenant*. Adopting it would commit provinces to working in partnership and to avoid taking actions which are offensive to other parts of the communion.¹²

When in 2006 both ECUSA and the Church of Nigeria - key figures in the drama¹³ - utterly backed the covenant project, this was a thoroughly encouraging sign, but the discussions have not reached the final stage yet. Approval and disapproval continues to come from various points, whether out of the fear that the Covenant may become a means of control and bind provinces too much or out of the fear that the AC may take hope in another - perhaps rather permissive than coercive - instrument, which due to the independence of the provinces must fail anyway. So it is about whether the Covenant would on the one hand side preserve the character of the Communion as both episcopally and synodically structured and on the other hand strengthen its cohesion.¹⁴

¹² Ward 313

¹³ Talking about key players in the game would sound somewhat peculiar...

¹⁴ Cf. Thomas 119-20.136-41

5. A Revaluation of the *Consensus fidelium*

The history of the Instruments of Communion/Unity reveals their limited adequacy as they have not been able to guarantee or even maintain the communion and have had to be further developed successively. When the recent draft of the Covenant¹⁵ concedes the inadequacy of a purely structural attempt to maintain communion, it also points to the importance of the *consensus fidelium*. Having worked as a Roman Catholic priest for most of the time since my ordination, this draws my attention, especially as the *consensus fidelium* has been quoted in important Roman Catholic documents of Vatican II (e.g. *Lumen Gentium* 12¹⁶) or Canon Iuris Canonici of 1983, and thus quite prominently. But in fact it has never received any major virtual value, eventually less and less.

And yet it also reminds me of my studies when we are repeatedly told - especially in systematics¹⁷ - about the so-called ‘Doctrinal Pentagon’: Scripture, Tradition, Magisterium, Theology and Sensus Fidelium. Deepening the Church’s insight into God’s message to the world, these five have to be taken into consideration and, though they are of different value, they are sources for truth.

As Anglicans we are of course not bound to RC interpretations. Yet, interestingly, several comments on the draft Covenant refer to a rather prominent Roman Catholic, John Henry Newman and his interpretation of *sensus* and *consensus fidelium*. Quite prudently he kept out of public discussions on Vatican I before 1875 and expressed his opinion only in private letters.¹⁸ There he judged the doctrine of infallibility as unbalanced and dangerous in practice (he talked about ‘shooting Niagara’) and took hope in the *sensus fidelium*, which in the end would help to ‘trim the boat’ again.¹⁹ A *sensus fidelium*, which became a *consensus fidelium* for Newman, was a ‘sign’ for bishops and pope that a right judgement, and therefore a doctrinal truth, had or had not been attained in the church.²⁰

But not only Newman and Döllinger were among those who stressed the importance of the sense of the faithful.²¹ In fact, Vatican I itself was fairly aware of possible negative consequences of too rigid expressions, as the group of Farfa Sabina, a Lutheran-RC group of theologians, has

¹⁵ Ridley Cambridge Draft (2009)

¹⁶ Rahner/Vorgrimler 136-7

¹⁷ I don’t like the term doctrine, reminding me of indoctrination.

¹⁸ Schatz 267-8

¹⁹ Ker 660; cf. Schatz 268

²⁰ Norris 151

²¹ About Döllinger’s view on con-/sensus fidelium cf. Klausnitzer 238-240

recently pointed out.²² But the majority was afraid of Gallicanism and preferred a maximalistic interpretation of infallibility leaving out all references to a somewhat helpful, let alone necessary consent of bishops or church. Again it was moved both by theological as well as political reasons.²³

6. Ecumenical Impact

I am far away from comparing Pastor Aeternus with the Anglican Covenant. But given the fact that even the fathers of Vatican I were concerned about sense of and reception by the faithful, it is encouraging that the mothers and fathers of the Covenant explicitly recognize the importance of the *sensus fidelium* today and give as much thought as possible to it. It reminds us of the value of belonging to a world-wide community, centred in Jesus Christ²⁴, because the church is not only an institution with structure and instruments, but much more profoundly a spiritual communion, existing with the help and sometimes in spite of concrete instruments.

I find it crucial and value it very highly that the drafts of the Covenant focus in a very balanced way on both the structural and spiritual dimension, though both of them are always a work in process. The more balanced our approach, the more convincing our efforts will be. Vatican II explicitly refrained from doctrinal declarations and definitions, but expressed their wish to be a pastoral council, not controlling, but sympathizing with today's world, today's people, today's faithful, because the joy and hope, mourning and fear of today's people are the joy, hope, mourning and fear of the Church. (*Gaudium et Spes* 1,1).²⁵

The Anglican Communion has always been in contrast, sometimes in competition, with other ecclesiastical bodies and in some discrete (??) moments of history have even provided a good example what a visibly united catholic church could be like. To provide and sign a Covenant in a healthy style for, like it or not, a polycentric church, might be a good challenge to other churches which fail to maintain unity by centralism or permissiveness. Thus it may eventually be another typically Anglican Contribution to Ecumenism, to the unfolding of the *Una Sancta* in the 21st century

Last but not least, remaining close to the sense of the faithful should help us theologians to remain discrete, down to earth and thus closer to heaven.

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²² Gruppe von Farfa Sabina 61-5

²³ Gruppe von Farfa Sabina 60

²⁴ Price 396-7

²⁵ Rahner/Vorgrimler 449

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