

An Anglican Response

to the recent declaration of the Church of Rome

Pope Benedict XVI recently approved a publication from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF –*the successor of the Inquisition*) judging non-Roman parts of the Church to be mere “ecclesial communities”, rather than true parts of the Church Catholic. The only possible exception to this judgment is the Orthodox Church, which although “defective”, or “wounded” due to its lack of a formal relationship to the Pope, is nevertheless considered a true part of the Church.

As some have pointed out, the Roman Communion has since the Counter-Reformation maintained essentially the same position (20th century ecumenical dialogue notwithstanding), and thus the present CDF is being very conservative and is saying nothing new or different. One might ask then, What has the Anglican response been historically? Are we merely an “ecclesial community”, or a gathering of Christians without a relation to Christ through his Catholic Church? Do we lack a valid ministry and sacraments? Are we merely pretending to be a “church”, and are our “priests” merely pretending to be true ministers of the Word of God and Sacraments?

Let us first address the question of what is rightly considered Catholic in our tradition, and then we shall address the question of priesthood and sacraments. The Anglican understanding of catholicity (universality) is formed by the teaching of the 5th century monk, St. Vincent of Lerins, who set forth in his *Commonitorium* a three-fold ‘test’ of what is catholic and what is not catholic. This is namely *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (‘what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all’). This is a test of ecumenicity, antiquity, and consent, by which the Church is to differentiate between true and false traditions.

The Anglican “Offices of Instruction” restate the Vincentian Canon for new converts, saying: “The Church is Catholic...because it is universal, holding earnestly the Faith for all time, in all countries, and for all people; and is sent to preach the Gospel to the whole world...” (The Book of Common Prayer, 1928 American edition, page 291). This modest restatement of the Vincentian Canon, only adds an evangelical character to the Anglican understanding of the Catholic Church, by saying that this Catholic Church is “sent to preach the Gospel to the whole world”.

In spite of his emphasis upon tradition, St. Vincent maintained that the final ground of Christian truth was Holy Scripture, and that the authority of the Church was to be invoked only to guarantee its right interpretation*. This too is made clear in the Anglican Articles of Religion (VI. *Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation*), “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved

thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith..."

By these criteria a great number of Romish, Anglo-Catholic, Affirming Catholic, Calvinist, Orthodox AND Post-1960's Anglican teachings and practices may be considered actually non-catholic, for they fail the 3-fold test of ecumenicity, antiquity, consent and lack basis in Holy Scripture.

The Roman Communion continues to define catholicity in terms of the Papacy, i.e., whether a Communion has a relationship to the Bishop of Rome, commonly called the Pope. Yet the Papacy as it has emerged and developed over the past 1,000 or so years does not meet the ancient three-fold test of Catholicity, for it is itself a unique innovation. Rome was ever only one patriarchate among several, and was not even considered primary until fairly recent (by recent, I mean probably by the time the Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria had fallen). Therefore the present claims of the Bishop of Rome, namely that he has "immediate and universal jurisdiction" over the entire, world-wide Catholic Church; that he is the Vicar of Christ on earth; that he speaks infallibly on matters of faith; that he reigns over a City/State in the Vatican; these are all modern developments that do not meet the test of Catholicity and are somewhat extravagant to say the least.

We obviously do not define the Catholic faith simply in terms of a relation to the Pope, although we should have utmost respect for Benedict XVI and for his predecessor. The Bishop of Rome is an important Catholic Bishop and he perhaps has developed a sort of primacy even among the separated Communion, but that is all the further we would be ready to go. We are right to be wary of the corruption and doctrinal innovations that have stemmed (and will again stem) from such un-tempered worldly power.

Now let us examine the question of priesthood and sacraments, beginning with the claims of the CDF.

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Why do the texts of the Council and those of the Magisterium since the Council not use the title of "Church" with regard to those Christian Communities born out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century?

Response: According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. These ecclesial Communities which, specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery¹⁹ cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called "Churches" in the proper sense.

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In the above question & answer format, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith judges that the communities in question lack a valid ministry and sacraments. Thus they are evidently mistaken in considering themselves to be "churches", and their "priests" are not true ministers of the Word of God

and the Sacraments. As evidence of this, it is claimed that the Communities “born out of the Reformation” have no Apostolic Succession and that they have not continued the genuine celebration of the Eucharist.

Let me point out at once that the Anglican Communion was not “born out of the 16th century at all” but was merely began to Reform during that time, a process that was more or less settled by 1662. Secondly, Anglicans in fact have not claimed to be a “Church” at all in the proper sense, but rather merely a Communion of National Provinces which are part of Christ’s One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. In making this claim we are nowhere near as bold as the Roman Communion in claiming to be “The” Church to the exclusion of Christians in other Christian Communions.

Third, Anglicans have in fact maintained the Apostolic Succession for the unique validity of our ordained ministry, specifically for sacramental purposes. This is understood to consist in the laying on of apostolic hands and the proper form administered in our ordination rites. All those who have been ordained thus “we declare to be rightly and lawfully ordained” (Articles of Religion, XXXVI). The question of Apostolic Succession in the Anglican Communion has been labored over and over again, and need not be addressed at length here, except to say that our Apostolic Succession was continued from the Roman Catholic Church itself and has lost nothing essential to the administration of Word and Sacraments by being reformed according to the principles of the ancient Church.

[NOTE: for further reading on this subject, please investigate the Bull known as Apostolicae Curae, published in 1896 by Pope Leo XIII, in which he declared Anglican orders to be “absolutely null & utterly void”; then read the learned rebuttal of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, Sapius Officio. These two documents loomed over Anglican-Roman relations throughout the 20th century, and continue to shape the debate. Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue reached virtual agreement by the 1990’s, but when some (a minority of) Anglicans began to ordain lady priestesses, the dialogue ceased.]

Finally, for the Eucharist, no one can deny that the Lord’s Supper is the very center of Anglican piety, where, set within the context of the daily offices (Matins & Evensong) it is offered for the edification and nourishment of each member of the Church, and where by faith each Churchman truly receives the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. It is also the primary means by which the Church (led by a priest) offers to the Father (1) the “holy gifts” of consecrated bread and wine, (2) our “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving”, and (3) our selves, our souls and bodies as a “living sacrifice” God. The fact that we do not profess the peculiarly Roman doctrine of Transubstantiation in the Eucharist can be no more a sign of defect in our understanding of the Sacrament than it is a sign of defect in the Orthodox or of any catholic Christian prior to the 16th century, including the Pope’s own forebears.

Contrary to what is professed by the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, faithful Anglicans of today (as ever) maintain the Apostolic Succession, continue to practice Baptism and the Eucharist, and hold to the Catholic Faith *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all) conforming at all times to Holy Scripture as the ground of truth.

As I stated before, new layers of innovation in doctrine over the past several centuries have brought about the sectarian divisions which have separated the various Communion from one another today. We need to maintain the principle of Catholicity in order to distinguish from true and false traditions. Let's get back to the basis of the catholic Faith and leave off from innovations, corruptions, and partisan grandstanding, which are at best a replaying of the old apostolic argument of "who is the greatest" and at worst represent a real departure from "the faith once delivered to the saints".

By Fr. McGrath, 2007