

# Church as Communion: the ARCIC Agreed Statement and its Significance

*An Address to the Synod of the Church of England, 9 February 2009*

***Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor***

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ – dear Friends,

I am grateful, and feel privileged, to have this opportunity of speaking to you here in Synod for the first and, most probably, for the last time.

The reason for my being here this afternoon is to say to you something about the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), of which I had the privilege to be Co-Chairman for over sixteen years. The key word, of course, of ARCIC was *koinonia* – quite an unfamiliar word when ARCIC was initiated in the late '60's. In fact, there were two very nice ladies who were then our secretaries, one Roman Catholic and the other Anglican and at Christmas one sent a Christmas card to the other saying, 'Happy Christmas – and *koinonia* to you too!'

I have been asked today to speak to you about that key concept in ARCIC's work, *communion*. It is clear that from the start ARCIC found this idea opened up fresh perspectives about the Church which seemed to make progress very possible. Firstly, ARCIC I described *communion/koinonia* as "the governing concept", the central theme of its Statements, the term most aptly expressing the mystery underlying New Testament images of the Church. What did it mean? We would say that the unity of the Church is a *koinonia* given and expressed. The agent of this communion is the Spirit of the Risen Lord who unites us as one in Christ. All Christian traditions believe that the Church is at

the same time both a communion of believers with Christ in the Holy Spirit, and a communion of believers with one another. It is a communion in faith, hope and love rooted in the Eucharist; communion in the sacraments; in the diversity of charisms; in reconciliation, communion in the ministry. It is a rich and wonderful concept.

Secondly, in ARCIC-II - following on from ARCIC-I - we decided to devote a whole Agreed Statement to exploring this theme more deeply. That great ecumenist, Cardinal Willebrands, then still at the helm of the Vatican's office for Christian Unity, had written and suggested a deeper ecclesiological study would be most helpful. We eventually stated in *Church as Communion*, that we wanted, and I quote, '*to give substance to the affirmation that Anglicans and Catholics are already in a real, though as yet imperfect communion, and to enable us to recognise the degree of communion that exists both within and between us*'. At the time of its publication, some perhaps regarded the Statement as a bit obvious – but I wonder. Had the Commission merely been calmly discussing and deepening an issue that was ultimately uncontroversial for Anglicans and Catholics? It now seems clear that our work touches not only what we need to resolve together but also some of the very issues you have been recently grappling with as a Communion. I am not going to go through the document in detail. I would just like to point to what to me seem to be some of its key challenges.

In paragraph 40, for example, it says, and I quote, 'Just as the church has to distinguish between tolerable and intolerable diversity in the expression of the apostolic faith, so in the area of life and practice the church has to discover what is disruptive of its own communion' – those are words agreed by Bishops and theologians officially commissioned to represent our two churches.

Later on, in n.43, ARCIC says that, I quote, ‘*For all the local churches to be together in communion, the one visible communion which God wills, it is required that all the constitutive elements of ecclesial communion are present and mutually recognised in each of them.*’

In paragraph 45 it outlines what it considers those constitutive elements to be: I quote, ‘it is now possible to describe what constitutes ecclesial communion. It is rooted in the confession of the one apostolic faith, revealed in the Scriptures, and set forth in the Creeds. It is founded upon one baptism. The one celebration of the Eucharist is its pre-eminent expression and focus. It necessarily finds expression in shared commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his Church. It is a life of shared concern for one another... ; in the placing of the interests of others above the interests of self; in making room for each other in the body of Christ; in solidarity with the poor and the powerless; and in the sharing of gifts both material and spiritual. Also constitutive of life in communion is acceptance of the same basic moral values ... For the nurture and growth of this communion, Christ the Lord has provided a ministry of oversight, the fullness of which is entrusted to the episcopate, which has the responsibility of maintaining and expressing the unity of the churches.’

Much in ARCIC’s more recent work has also been about communion. In that very significant document, *The Gift of Authority*, it says: and I quote, ‘The mutual interdependence of all the churches is integral to the reality of the Church as God wills it to be. No local church that participates in the living Tradition can regard itself as self-sufficient.’ That is really important. It is stating something crucial, namely that the Anglican Church as such is not self-sufficient; it depends on its real, though imperfect

communion with other churches. And although Catholics believe that the Church of Christ *subsists* in the Catholic Church, that very wording implies that the Roman Catholic Church is not totally self-sufficient, and that in the riches and gifts of other Christian churches are elements that would contribute to its fullness.

At the end of *Church as Communion* ARCIC makes a bold claim, which it asks our two churches to evaluate: namely, that, I quote, “our two communions agree in their understanding of the church as communion”. That puts really fundamental questions to us both, which underlie this afternoon’s discussion. Is this so? Do we agree on this? If so, how does that find expression in the way we conceive our ultimate goal? And how does it influence decisions we may take before we reach that goal? Precisely such questions have been at issue in some of your internal debates of late. At the heart of *The Virginia Report*, the Covenant process, and many other discussions, is the question of the bonds of communion. What are they? How necessary are they? Do they have sufficient strength not only to be able to hold people together but, even more vitally, to deepen communion further? All this impacts on how our relationship is going to develop as well. If we are to make progress through dialogue we must be able to enter into solemn and binding agreements with each other. We want to see a deepening not a lessening of communion in each other’s own ecclesial life. In the end our ecumenical journey has to be a journey towards fuller communion.

Let me be frank. Your struggles with issues on Communion which deeply affect the unity of the Anglican Communion, affect us all. Divisions within any Church or Ecclesial Community impoverish the communion of the whole Church. We Roman Catholics cannot be indifferent to what is happening to our friends in the Anglican

Communion and, in particular, in the Church of England. All I can say – and I would not want to be misinterpreted - is that it is only in a fuller and deeper unity that the truth and the demands of the Gospel are to be discerned. In this sense, unity is a prerequisite to truth and you should not settle for less – even if it takes time.

So where does all this lead? First of all, I must say that we cannot give up on that ultimate goal even if it still seems so distant. It has to be visible and sacramental communion. We are Eucharistic communities and the communion we seek is *Eucharistic* – communion in one Eucharist and in the ministries, faith and authority that make it possible. Full communion is more than rediscovering a shared history, or fellow-feeling, and it is more than the parallel structures of life and worship that currently exist between us.

We are at a particular phase on this long ecumenical journey. I remember the late Professor Henry Chadwick saying to me during one of our ARCIC discussions, ‘the greatest difficulty and obstacle between our two churches is not this or that doctrine, but the fact that we have been separated from each other for four hundred years.’ How right he was! I also remember words of Pope John Paul II at the visit of Archbishop Robert Runcie. He took Robert Runcie’s arm and said ‘*our affective collegiality will lead eventually to effective communion.*’

So I see the ecumenical landscape between our two churches today as a kind of *receptive* ecumenism. In this transitional period there must be a deepening of communion between our two churches. For me, it is inspired by words in Pope John Paul’s Encyclical Letter on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*, and also by the experience we have had in meetings between your Bishops and ours over the past couple of years – meetings which have

expressed friendship, a desire to work together and to acknowledge each other's gifts. Is it not true we can learn and receive from each other aspects of faith and ecclesiology, life, worship and spirituality that in fact belong to the whole Church, as Pope John Paul put it in his encyclical? In the past we have often seemed to ask, explicitly or implicitly: 'what do others need to learn from us?' At this time the way forward may come rather from the opposite question: 'What can we with integrity learn for our own church from the life of faith of others?'

This approach expresses the spiritual ecumenism that is at the heart of the ecumenical movement. Rather than focussing primarily on doctrinal convergence, important as that is, spiritual ecumenism promotes a living dialogue that gives room for an exchange of spiritual gifts that enrich us mutually as we get to know and appreciate each other's treasures and so discover practices and ideas that can enhance our own Christian life and ministry. How crucial this is here in our own country. England is *terra ecumenica* and it is up to us here to set the tone and the style, and the impetus that can carry our ecumenical journey forward. Our two churches, it seems to me, increasingly see that we have to face the challenges of our very secular society together. And underlying all this is the fact that we now *experience* each other, as I myself have done, as friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, people attempting the same mission of bringing the Gospel to today's world. I think this is hugely significant and a reason for great hope.

But I must add that ARCIC's, *Church as Communion*, does challenge each of our churches to deepen its internal communion, maybe in its structures of authority. It challenges the Anglican Church to deepen those structures and attain an essential unity for the living and preaching of the Gospel; it challenges the Roman Catholic Church too,

to reflect much further than we have thus far on the place of diversity in the Church's life, and how authority should be exercised at different levels in the Church. We both have much to learn.

I would like to end as I began with grateful thanks for receiving me so kindly today. I give thanks to God for all that has enriched my own spiritual and ecclesial life through my ecumenical friendships, especially with so many Anglican friends. One of my greatest memories is the wonderful visit of Pope John Paul to England in 1982. The tears rolled down my face when he visited Canterbury and I thought of the hopes for the future of our two churches. I can but repeat today the prayer the Pope expressed on that day: *O Christ, may all that is part of today's encounter be born of the Spirit of Truth and be made fruitful through love. Behold before us the past and the future; behold before us the desires of so many hearts. You who are the Lord of History and the Lord of human hearts be with us. Christ Jesus, Eternal Son of God, be with us. Amen.* Thank you.