

**The Conversion of England:
Sermon by Robin Griffith-Jones.
The Temple Church, 25 October 2009.**

This week the Roman Catholic Church announced a plan to admit Anglicans to the Roman Church, with provision for them to retain aspects of their Anglican liturgies and disciplines. Furore followed. There were practical/political questions to ask: how many priests will go, with how many members of how many congregations? What will they ask to take with them: church buildings? How will their departure change the character of the Church of England?¹

On a Sunday morning in the pulpit, perhaps we can take a longer view.

Relations between the Roman Church and the Church of England have tended to be edgy. When the Catholic hierarchy was re-established in 1850 Wiseman stirred anti-Catholic feeling by his pastoral in praise of the Pope, "From without the Flaminian Gate".² Wiseman believed passionately in the conversion of England, and preached on it regularly.

1895 (in the reign of Queen Victoria!), the following prayer was issued and was authorised by Pope Leo XIII.

O Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and our own most gentle Queen and Mother, look down in mercy upon England, thy Dowry, and upon us all who greatly hope and trust in thee.... Intercede for our separated English brethren, that they may be united with us in the one true Fold.

In the next year Leo, in the papal bull *Apostolicae Curae*, declared Anglican orders "absolutely null and utterly void".

Was this, as one might have expected, the end of high-level conversations? No. They carried on, less formally. And in 1967 Archbishop Ramsay and Pope Paul VI established an Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, ARCIC.

¹ The new provision is for *groups*, not individuals. Excerpts: *Under the terms of the Apostolic Constitution, pastoral oversight and guidance will be provided for groups of former Anglicans through a Personal Ordinariate, whose Ordinary will usually be appointed from among former Anglican clergy... In this way, the Apostolic Constitution seeks to balance on the one hand the concern to preserve the worthy Anglican liturgical and spiritual patrimony and, on the other hand, the concern that these groups and their clergy will be integrated into the Catholic Church... It is the hope of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, that the Anglican clergy and faithful who desire union with the Catholic Church will find in this canonical structure the opportunity to preserve those Anglican traditions precious to them and consistent with the Catholic faith... In the meantime, many individual Anglicans have entered into full communion with the Catholic Church. Sometimes there have been groups of Anglicans who have entered while preserving some "corporate" structure. Examples of this include, the Anglican diocese of Amritsar in India, and some individual parishes in the United States which maintained an Anglican identity when entering the Catholic Church under a "pastoral provision" adopted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and approved by Pope John Paul II in 1982.*

² Excerpts from Wiseman's letter are at Appendix I.

ARCIC looked into areas of possible agreement between the churches where before there had been – bitter, hostile – division, and indeed into ways that might be pursued towards institutional convergence. ARCIC started with Eucharist, Ministry and Authority. The Final Report, issued in 1981 after various consultations and revisions, was optimistic, finding substantial understanding, even agreement on long-contested issues.³

Within a few months, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome had responded with some observations.⁴ The report, according to these observations, was riddled with ambiguous language, making it possible for both sides to sign up to one formula in two quite different senses. Even “substantial” (as in understanding or agreement) does not mean in ordinary English what it means in Roman theology. And where the language was clear, the report’s understanding was, time and again, on the eucharist, priesthood and petrine primacy, incompatible with the decrees of Trent, Vatican I and/or Vatican II. The Prefect of the Congregation, who wrote a prefatory letter to the Observations, was Cardinal Ratzinger, now the Pope.

When the American Anglican Church ordained women, Rome responded by offering Anglicans admission to the Roman Church with allowance for local liturgies and disciplines. When in 1992 the Church of England ordained women, there were people here who sought the same provision. But Rome had meanwhile, in its dealings with the Orthodox, renounced the expansion of such Uniate structures, so demurred.

Not that the Roman Church ignored the possibilities that seemed to be opening up, thanks to women’s ordination. In an interview with *The Tablet*, March 1993, Basil Hume said: “This could be a big moment of grace, it could be the conversion of England for which we have prayed all these years.”⁵

By the way: in one southern diocese of the Church of England, nine priests left with much fanfare. Six came back, with no fanfare at all. Rome and the priests did not want a fuss, the Anglican diocese did not make one. That’s more like it.

In 1998 Ratzinger wrote a commentary on a letter of John Paul II, in which Ratzinger effectively declared *Apostolicae Curae* – and so the invalidity of Anglican orders – an infallible, so irreversible, doctrine.⁶

Ratzinger, with a deep, strong sense of the Church and of the papacy as intrinsic to the church and to every celebration of its eucharist,⁷ has written of the CofE and its offshoots through the commonwealth:

³ ARCIC 1, Final Report: http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcic_final.html

⁴ A copy of the Congregation’s Observations (which were published in English in *i.a. The Tablet*, 15 May 1982, 492-495, and *ARCIC 1 Revisited* [Hempstead, NY: Diocese of Rockville, 1985], 94-101) is attached as a separate document, for purposes only of research and review. Copyright remains with the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

⁵ The comment was quickly seen by the Cardinal’s aides as unwise, and was qualified

⁶ For this episode (including the Anglican response), J.L. Allen, *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican’s Enforcer of the Faith* (London, New York: Continuum, 2000), 230.

⁷ ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some Aspects of the Church understood as Communion’, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 28 May 1992, esp. arts 12-14:

*Jesus did not found a Catholic party in a cosmopolitan debating society, but a Catholic Church to which he promised the fullness of truth. ..A body which reduces its Catholics to a party within a religious parliament can hardly deserve to be called a branch of the Catholic Church, but a national religion, dominated and structured by the principles of liberal tolerance, in which the authority of revelation is subordinate to democracy and private opinion.*⁸

Well, it is salutary – if sobering – occasionally to see ourselves as others see us. In ecumenical dialogue, we, I think, have thought of the Roman Church and our own as two sisters saddened by a long estrangement and seeking reconciliation; the Roman Church has thought of us as an errant daughter who, seeing at last the wrongness of her ways, longs to return to her mother's bosom.

Now the Uniate structures offered to American Anglicans are to be offered to British Anglicans too. We have no right to be surprised, let alone aggrieved. Was the manner of the announcement rude, almost insulting to the Archbishop? To our eyes, yes. But Rome's eyes are not on our Archbishop, a layman out of communion with Mother Church; Rome's eyes are on those who might now return to their Mother's embrace.

(We may too easily forget that we are just one of several features in Rome's ecumenical landscape. The Lutheran Church in Germany has women ministers, diffused authority and a very liberal wing. But Ratzinger, a German theologian, reveres Luther, knows Lutheranism well and has counted Lutherans among his closest friends. Is the *tone* of his dialogue with the Lutherans not quite the tone he adopts with us? That is no surprise.)

Yes, it is good to see ourselves, from time to time, as others see us. But we need not concede the force of their description. By historical accident, the CofE has evolved into something immensely valuable. Too far from the centre of Roman and of Reformed power for either to stamp its authority on England, we held both traditions in – often uneasy! – union. Medieval Rome claimed exclusive access to and provision of revealed truth. Having disbelieved that one claimant in the 16th century, we would not easily submit ourselves to any other. We have developed an acutely uncomfortable mission to be honest, open, willing to air deeply held and deeply conflicting convictions; in the expectation that truth – God's truth – will slowly, painfully be revealed thereby.

A church that has accommodated an ever-wider range of views has been trying to accommodate those who hold any of them. We have sought to be a national church. And even though Christian faith and observance have fallen away, we have never abandoned this vision: that we are here in God's name to serve, as best we can, everyone who lives in this country. The papacy is intrinsic to the pope's own view of Church; and yes, the nation is, I think, intrinsic to ours.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html

⁸ *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 91, (in T. Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: OUP, 2008) 99).

This may seem to have made us, at best, a leafy, undemanding suburb of the faith, for those who will not take on the rigours of the Church's real life. At worst, a funfare of possibilities, all tending to sink to the lowest common level.

But perhaps, on the contrary, it has made us something special. Many of us have a weaker sense of Church than the Pope has, and a stronger sense of nation. I suspect, as you may, that the style – and perhaps the content – of the present pope's ecumenism are alien to the Roman Catholic Bishops and people of this country. (It is hard to imagine that any Roman Catholic bishop in England would want to belittle or embarrass Rowan Williams.) Nobody would claim that the present blend here of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches is either permanent or perfect. But it serves: different emphases in mission and self-understanding combine to make us, together, a stronger and more effective witness to Christ than either of us would be without the friendship and support and simply the presence of the other.

(This is, as you will understand, a very recent development. Before the War, the bishops of Liverpool could not be seen in public together. At a public event, the Anglican Bishop would arrive by the front entrance and, when the Roman Archbishop was arrived, would leave by the back. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to such bishops as Shepherd and Warlock, the “fish and chips” of Liverpool – perfectly matched and never seen apart. Look around the Inns, our neighbourhoods, the office of the Temple Church – good heavens, we are grateful for the prayerful, dedicated work of Roman Catholic friends and colleagues.)

And our role, as the CofE, with or without the close, generous collaboration with the Roman Catholic hierarchy of this country that we have all valued and learnt from over the past 30 years? This role is never seen more clearly than on a Sunday such as this, when we bring before God ourselves and our church, all Christians in this land, and our whole nation. We give thanks for our nation, we pray for her, and in the sight of God we plead Christ's sacrifice on her behalf. And then we head back out into our daily lives to bear witness to Christ; for we too, in the Church of England, pray and work for the conversion of England.

Appendix I: Excerpts from Wiseman's 1850 letter, 'From without the Flaminian Gate'.

The great work, then, is complete; what you have long desired and prayed for is granted. Your beloved country has received a place among the fair Churches, which, normally constituted, form the splendid aggregate of Catholic Communion; Catholic England has been restored to its orbit in the ecclesiastical firmament, from which its light had long vanished, and begins now anew its course of regularly adjusted action round the centre of unity, the source of jurisdiction, of light and vigour... How must the saints of our country, whether Roman or British, Saxon or Norman, look down from their seats of bliss, with beaming glance, upon this new evidence of the faith and Church which led them to glory, sympathising with those who have faithfully adhered to them through

centuries of ill repute for the truth's sake, and now reap the fruit of their patience and long suffering. And all those blessed martyrs of these latter ages, who have fought the battles of the faith under such discouragement, who mourned, more than over their own fetters or their own pain, over the desolate ways of their own Sion, and the departure of England's religious glory; oh! how must they bless God, who hath again visited his people,--how take part in our joy, as they see the lamp of the temple again enkindled and rebrightening, as they behold the silver links of that chain which has connected their country with the see of Peter in its vicarial government changed into burnished gold; not stronger nor more closely knit, but more beautifully wrought and more brightly arrayed... And of these consolations may one of the most sweet to his paternal heart be the propagation of holy religion in our country, the advancement of his spiritual children there in true piety and devotion, and our ever-increasing affection and attachment to the see of St. Peter. From

<http://roamincatholicphiladelphia.blogspot.com/2009/08/out-of-flaminian-gate.html>