

A Spiritual Assessment of Anglican and Protestant Orders: Absolutely Null and Utterly Void?

“Absolutely null and utterly void.” These words, couched in strong negative terms (“null and void” would have had the same meaning, but without the emotional baggage), were pronounced by Leo XIII in 1896 in a document known as *Apostolicae Curae*, and recently reiterated by Benedict XVI before he became Pope.¹ They apply to the orders received by Anglican priests. All the more do they apply to the ministers ordained in the many other churches stemming from the Reformation. None of them are officially recognized by the Roman Catholic church as priests, and the bread and wine over which they may speak the words of Jesus are not recognized by the Roman Catholic church as the body and blood of Christ.

During my many years (1975-1992) in the Canadian Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue this presented a theological question for me, but some twenty years later, involved in the ministry of the Jesuit Centre of Spirituality in Halifax, this question has become more experiential and more urgent. The ministry of our Centre reaches out across denominational divides, and Christians and ministers of many denominations have availed themselves of it. In our ministry we discern the priests and ministers who come to us out of the Anglican, main-line and evangelical Protestant traditions to be as richly endowed in the Spirit in both their personal lives and their ministry as Roman Catholic ones, and their struggles to build and to maintain Christian community to be just as genuine.

In this discernment are we being naive and do we fail to zero in on the lacunae and lacks which, our Church documents point out, in principle mark the lives and ministries of our non-Catholic counterparts? First of all the Spirit is not limited by denominational or faith boundaries in dispensing his gifts. As spiritual guides our role is to recognize and foster the work of the Spirit in whoever comes our way, whatever their denominational commitments or lack thereof. And in ministering to ministers within these denominations we are also ministering to their people: they deserve as high a level of spiritually grounded pastoral care as our own. Secondly we sense in all the ministers and priests who come our way struggles similar to our own: they have been inserted into a Church situation which has strengths and weaknesses and they do their best, with their own strengths and weaknesses and those of their denomination, as we do with ours. The spiritual conversations we have with them enable us to discern our complementary gifts and charisms, and to acknowledge the other side of the coin, our complementary

¹Cf. Cardinal Ratzinger’s *Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the Professio fidei* (29 June 1998). At the time Ratzinger was the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In his commentary he used Leo XIII’s declaration on Anglican orders as an example of a truth which must be definitively held but is not divinely revealed. This use of *Apostolicae Curae* as an example of a teaching which is definitively to be held has a certain authority. *Apostolicae Curae*, however, refers to past events which are subject to re-interpretation as new data and perspectives emerge, and it touches on a present situation which will evolve in ways beyond our grasp. The issues it raises are subtle and subject to ongoing reflection.

weaknesses. Whatever our denominational loyalties, we struggle through successes and failures, at times we feel at home within our own communities, and are thankful for the gifts bestowed on them, at other times we feel frustration with their cumbersome structures and human failings. Sinfulness is more difficult to eradicate in communities than in individuals, and Church communities are not exempt from this.

Catholic apologists typically argue that the Catholic church is more perfect and more holy than other Christian denominations. It is, however, easy to make such arguments when you pick and choose your examples, positive ones from the catholic side, and negative ones from the non-catholic side. In addition non-Catholic churches are often critiqued because their members have a flawed understanding of what the Catholic church considers essential, e.g. the eucharist as sacrifice and the real presence. But you will find a large number of Catholics who share in the same ambiguities and looseness in their understanding of essential points of their faith. Catholics rejoice, and rightly so, in the fulness and clarity of the sacramental means of grace available to them, but can we say that Catholics as a whole up to the time of Vatican II found scripture to be as powerful a means a grace as it has been among faithful Protestants? Does the sexual abuse crisis, which has touched various churches and which in the Catholic church has triggered strong protective reflexes among some members of the hierarchy, not serve as an agent of levelling? We can busy ourselves with listing the lacunae of non-Catholic ministries, but should we not take the log out of our own eye before pointing out the splinter in someone else's? We all fall short of God's plan for us. The re-evangelization of Church members whose faith has become vague and whose connection to the Church is loose and episodic at best is a recognized need in all churches, even if expressed in different terms. Rather than black and white, should we not be talking about shades of grey, or even a tapestry of colours which cannot be easily compared?

At the level of spiritual experience apodictic judgements of nullity and invalidity do not really make sense. In the presence of God's grace and God's power each one is unique and there is no room for *a priori* assumptions that grace is not operative or less operative because someone does not minister within a set of criteria set down by the Catholic Church. Rather we are drawn to praise what God accomplishes through imperfect instruments whether Catholic, Anglican, or Protestant. That is the reality we are privileged to encounter day by day in our work of spiritual direction.

This spontaneous recognition takes place at higher levels within the Church as well. There is a regular pattern not only of priests and ministers collaborating in local ministerial associations but also of bishops establishing contacts across denominational lines, for example official meetings of Roman Catholic bishops with their Anglican counterparts, meetings marked by genuine sharing and appreciation of similar experiences. The most striking examples occur at the topmost level of the Church. In recent decades popes have had cordial meetings with religious leaders of other Christian groups, Orthodox, Anglican, and Reformed. Let us single out a couple of instances. Most recently we have witnessed the warm relationship between Pope Benedict XVI and the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, invited to give a major address at the synod in Rome on the new evangelization. Would such an invitation have

been extended to someone judged a heretic with nothing of significance to say? Let us go back to a significant moment in which Paul VI greeted the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, in 1966, and gave him the gift of the episcopal ring he wore when Archbishop of Milan. On the one hand, Paul knew about the Church's 1896 decree that Ramsey's ordination as priest and bishop was absolutely null and utterly void. On the other hand he chose the powerful symbolic gesture of giving him his episcopal ring. This gesture pointed to a personal and non-official recognition by Paul VI of the genuineness of the ministry Archbishop Ramsey exercised. Would Paul VI have made such a gift to someone he really thought was nothing but an impostor masquerading as an archbishop?

How can we square the decree which declared Anglican orders "null and void" with these spontaneous and personal gestures of recognition?² Let us bring in the notion of invalidity, used in Roman Catholic canon law. If the Church declares an action to be invalid, it tells us that as far as it is concerned the action has not taken place, for example, the couple whose marriage is annulled because of the lack of some essential element required for the marriage. (By contrast, if the action is merely illicit, it is recognized as having taken place, but in contravention to canonical regulations.) This "null and void" declaration applies to Anglican orders, *a fortiori* to Protestant orders, but not to Orthodox orders. It implies unreadiness on the part of Rome to acknowledge that Anglican and Protestant ordination ceremonies confer orders in the Catholic sense.³ This decree tells us that the Church lacks the certainty required to reassure its faithful that the orders conferred within the Anglican Church are valid like our own. In most cases Anglican priests who wish to become Catholic priests are ordained unconditionally, but in some cases orders have been conferred conditionally rather than

²During my years on the Canadian Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue I remember the 1986 response of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to the documents issued by ARCIC-I. In particular one point they made stood out in my memory, the text of which I have just found: "We would wish to add to other pertinent data our own spontaneous recognition of the genuine character of the episcopal ministry and priestly commitment of our Anglican counterparts in Canada (CCCB response to ARCIC Final Report, Ottawa, 1986)." At first blush this is a surprising statement. Its content is not surprising to me since the Canadian dialogue was involved in the give-and-take in the background of the bishops' response. But upon reading it anew I find its clarity and forthrightness quite striking. As I remember the context, the operative word in the CCCB statement is "spontaneous". "Spontaneous" is meant to be distinct from "official". In other words the Canadian bishops were not intending to overthrow *Apostolicae Curae*. But they needed to be true to their own personal experience of the episcopal and priestly ministry of their Anglican counterparts. This quote is found in <http://www.acronymfinder.com/Anglican_Roman-Catholic-International-Commission-%28ARCIC%29.html>

³This official judgement is based upon a factual situation, and if the situation were to change this would open up the possibility of a re-evaluation. Cf. the letter of Cardinal Willebrands, head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, to the Co-Presidents of ARCIC-II, in July 1985. In 2008, however, Cardinal Kasper, a successor to Cardinal Willebrands, told the Anglican bishops assembled at Lambeth that the decision on the part of Churches of the Anglican Communion to ordain women as bishops makes such a re-evaluation impossible.

absolutely by the Catholic church upon a former Anglican priest or bishop (examples: Graham Leonard and John Jay Hughes). Thus the Church did officially recognize the possibility that the Anglican orders of these two men were valid, which means that other such instances cannot in principle be excluded.

This “null and void” declaration is mitigated by Vatican II. Vociferous Catholics may refer to Anglican bishops/priests as lay persons pretending to be bishops/priests, and contrast the “real absence” in their Eucharist with the “real presence” in ours, but they must deal with the consequences of the Vatican II declaration that Anglicans and Protestants are endowed with some of the full sacramental reality of the Church. God’s providence embraces them as it embraces us, and God’s grace is present in their worship:

The brethren divided from us also use many liturgical actions of the Christian religion. These most certainly can truly engender a life of grace in ways that vary according to the condition of each Church or Community. These liturgical actions must be regarded as capable of giving access to the community of salvation. It follows that the separated Churches and Communities as such, though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Church. (Vat. II, *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, par 3)

Canon law provides a orderly framework for the activity, especially sacramental, of the Roman Catholic Church, setting down structures, requirements, rules, procedures, and parameters which offer outward channels and visible markers for the work of grace. It gives greater security to the Catholic faithful who want to know for sure that God’s grace is available and operative. It gives them benchmarks by which they know that their priests and their eucharistic celebrations are for real. We must, however, remember that canon law regulates the life of the Church but not the action of God. It provides orderly and secure patterns for the life of grace, but does not control that grace itself. It has nothing to say about whether or how God might choose to operate outside the framework it defines. Cannot God also choose to work outside the scope of Roman Catholic canon law? Indeed from all evidence God does so with great abundance and generosity, and this Vatican II recognizes.

The Church may be unready to recognize someone as validly ordained in the Roman Catholic sense, but this does not preclude the possibility that God gives to that person a grace and a charism equivalent to that of ordination and blesses the sacraments which he/she confers. Contact with non-Catholic counterparts in the ministry have convinced many of us that God does indeed work powerfully in their ministry, and that in many cases the evidences of a priestly “character” at work are abundant.⁴ By contrast, the Church proceeds cautiously, and

⁴What are we to make of women priests and bishops within the Anglican Church? Even if their official recognition by the Catholic Church is excluded, non-official recognition by their Catholic

would need a broader range of evidence to ground an official recognition of the validity of the orders of all Anglican priests and bishops.

Where does that leave us as Catholics?

First of all the lack of official canonical recognition of the status or “character” of Protestant and Anglican ministers and priests does not forbid a spontaneous recognition by Catholics, from laypersons all the way up to the pope, arising from their spiritual and pastoral contacts, that these ministers and priests are genuine in their ministry, that God acts through them in a stable and recognizable way, and that in some cases they are endowed with a “character” similar to the one we recognize in our own priests. Canon law and church pronouncements, for instance, recognize the orders conferred within churches in the Orthodox tradition as endowed with the same “character” as our own because they clearly have apostolic succession in the traditional sense and their understanding of the sacraments, including ordination, is substantially the same as ours. But it remains true that many Catholics easily recognize the grace of God at work in those ordained within Protestant and Anglican churches, male or female, as instruments to minister to their people in accord with the designs of divine providence.

Secondly since the mystery of God’s grace is not under the control of church authorities, the scope of the “absolutely null and utterly void” pronouncement is limited. It cannot set boundaries on what God chooses to do in His grace. Already Vatican II puts us in the direction of limiting this pronouncement. God’s grace is operative in non-Catholic ministries. If we use as a parallel the existence of God which many in our world call into question, the Church’s position in this “null and void” pronouncement should be seen as akin to agnosticism (we cannot ascertain the validity of these orders with sufficient clarity to recognize them officially) rather than atheism (we know and we proclaim that these orders have no validity, meaning, or effectiveness.)

Thirdly we have to take seriously the self-definition of our non-Catholic counterparts. If they do not consider themselves priests in the Roman Catholic sense, or do not share in the catholic understanding of the Eucharist, there is no need to recognize in their ministry a charism which they do not pretend to exercise, though we should recognize the real graces that flow from their ministry. In some cases their profession of faith and their sense of the centrality of Christ might differ from ours, and this nuances the way in which we might recognize them. This is not to put them down but to respect the ways in which they want to be recognized as different.

counterparts is not. Indeed experience of women priests and bishops within the Anglican communion, their vision, their commitment, their pastoral compassion, opens the way for the same kind of spontaneous recognition as occurs for male priests and bishops. That the Catholic Church does not officially recognize their ministry does not limit the action of God’s grace in and through these women and our ability to spontaneously recognize that action.

If, however, like most Anglican priests, they do have a catholic understanding of their priestly orders and the eucharist they celebrate, we can spontaneously honour their ministry, based not on the legal certainty provided by canon law but on the recognition, based in shared experience, of spiritual and pastoral affinity. While we may not be sure that they have the precise “character” which is imparted to Catholic priests when they are ordained, grace still flows from their ministry and their eucharistic celebrations, and they can be seen as endowed with a similar “character”, but one which falls outside the purview and control of our church and its regulations. This means that when Anglican priests become Roman Catholic priests the default option ought to be conditional reordination rather than absolute reordination.

Fourthly Catholics maintain that the Church in communion with the Roman Pontiff is destined to play a central unifying role in bringing the various Christian denominations together. It is already clear that this is not to take place by simply having all other Christians join and submit to the Roman Catholic Church in its present state, and leave behind the gifts of the spirit they experienced in their own denomination, their ways of prayer and worship as inferior and second-rate. No, all of these gifts have to be incorporated into the fuller unity which Christ wants his followers to enjoy. Our faith that God has a special role for the Catholic Church to play in unifying the Churches is faith and not vision. It moves us into mystery, into the unknown. Our insecurity might lead us to work out pre-conditions and timetables for unity to happen, but in the end God is a God of surprises. As we seek unity, our mind ought to be as is the mind of Christ Jesus, who, totally secure in his relation to his Father, emptied himself of prerogative and entitlement. The only way forward is the way of *kenosis* (emptying out of self) and the way of trust in the ways of divine providence. This should be part of the consciousness of all Christians who seek unity, including Roman Catholics.

Fifthly, for some in the Catholic Church the recognition of the charisms of their Anglican counterparts may come more easily, and for others, who have not had personal experience of Anglican priests, it may come more reluctantly. In any event the Church does not impose this recognition as it does the recognition of Orthodox orders. More dialogue is needed between different sectors of the Roman Catholic Church as we seek greater convergence and synergy on the broadest possible front in facing the challenges of new evangelization.

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December 10, 2012
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