

Women Bishops in the Church of England?

a response to the ‘Rochester Report’
of the House of Bishops Working Party on Women in the Episcopate

from the Department of Dialogue and Unity
of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales

Introductory Remarks

1. In their Preface to the 2004 ‘Rochester Report’ (henceforth referred to simply as ‘the Report’), the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, on behalf of the House of Bishops of the Church of England, invited ecumenical partners to let them have their reflections on the Report. As the body within the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales with a specific responsibility for ecumenical relations, the Department of Dialogue and Unity warmly welcomes the opportunity to offer such reflections.
2. Our response to the Rochester Report deliberately concentrates on the content and arguments presented in the Report itself, rather than presenting afresh the Roman Catholic position on the ordination of women as priests and bishops. We have been growing in dialogue and friendship long enough now for us to be open and honest to each other, speaking what we perceive to be the truth, but always in love. We recognise that for Anglicans the Roman Catholic perspective on this issue is but one of many to be considered, but we are grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution to the debate, in the context of our continuing commitment to work together as closely as possible as sisters and brothers in Christ, bringing his Gospel to the world.
3. Throughout the Report, there is expressed the desire to maintain as much unity as possible within the Church of England and within the Anglican Communion. Although the ordination of women bishops in the Church of England would undoubtedly create an additional major obstacle to any future full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, and might further impair the degree of communion already existing, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales remain committed to maintaining as much unity as possible with the Church of England. As an ecumenical partner, the Catholic Church also prays for as full a communion as possible within the Church of England and within the Anglican Communion as a whole.
4. The ‘Rochester Report’ is a long, comprehensive and closely-argued document which carefully attempts to give full consideration to both sides in an informed debate about the ordination of women as bishops. Any fully satisfactory response would require a document of similar length. This much shorter response from the Department of Dialogue and Unity focuses on what we consider to be the central issues.
5. The Foreword to the Report mentions the ‘struggle’ and ‘pain’ involved in the process towards reaching a decision on ordaining women as bishops. We recognise the seriousness with which the debate has been conducted, and the focus on serious theological debate and ‘objective and universally accessible criteria’ (3.1.16) rather than less-adequate starting-points – for example, the arguments from widespread support (3.1.5f), from the subjective convictions of individuals (3.1.8f), from experience of women’s ministry (3.1.18) or from the evident professionalism and holiness of women (3.1.19f). Some of our reflections simply echo notes of caution already contained in the text of the Report.

A risk too far for the Church of England

6. The Report openly accepts that there remains ‘a lack of consensus within the Church of England on the issue of women’s ministry’, that strong opposition to the decision to ordain women as priests has not died away, and that there is no sign of the division over this issue ceasing to exist (1.1.4). It is stated, indeed, that the members of the Working Party itself reflected the ‘impasse that exists in the Church of England as a whole’ (1.2.4). There are ‘serious differences within the Church of England and the wider Church about whether it is right for women to be ordained as bishops’ (8.1.1), and ‘a fundamental difference of opinion’ on whether ordaining bishops would be a development which is biblically based, and which takes tradition and reason seriously (8.1.8). Leaving aside for a moment all doctrinal, theological and ecumenical issues, these conclusions in themselves would seem to call into question the wisdom of proceeding now with a decision to ordain women as bishops in the Church of England.
7. There is much to be said for the conclusion that the ‘theological logic that made it right for women to be ordained as priests also makes it right for them to be ordained as bishops’ (4.3.10). If the Church of England had made an irrevocable decision to ordain women as priests, there is an inescapable logic about the eventual ordination of women as bishops. The Church of England, however, talks of an ‘open process of reception’ for considering the rightness or otherwise of the decision to ordain women as priests, a process of discernment by which this development ‘could be either accepted or rejected’ (3.6.10). This process is one which ‘will continue until not just the Church of England but the “whole Church” comes to a common mind about the matter’ (3.6.16). Alongside the remaining impasse in the Church of England on the ordination of women as priests, the continuing process of reception of this development which is ‘hypothetically reversible’ (3.6.24) at very least raises serious questions about the timing of a decision to ordain women as bishops.
8. As we will state again later, however, there seems to us to be a tremendous and intolerable ecclesiological risk involved in taking such a step without an assurance that it is right and irreversible. If the decision to ordain women as priests, and later bishops, is ‘hypothetically reversible’, how can it be maintained that ‘this does not mean that the orders of individual women priests currently ordained in the Church of England are open to question’ (3.6.26). The position presented in 3.6.26 and 3.6.27 is untenable from a Roman Catholic perspective: it is not only paradoxical but contradictory. If the decision to ordain women priests remains open to question on theological and doctrinal grounds, then the same must be true of the orders of those women who have been ordained. How could women priests be held to hold valid orders if it were one day discerned that the original decision to ordain them was not consonant with the will of God as expressed in Scripture and tradition? If the Church of England retains such a position, Roman Catholics are inevitably left asking serious questions about the nature of ordained ministry in the Church of England, and the notion of ‘valid orders’ being employed in the Report.
9. This is a vital question for Catholic teaching, as any doubts about the validity of orders also involves serious doubts about the validity above all of the Eucharist celebrated by the priests concerned (and any ordinations celebrated by bishops). Catholic teaching about the Church and sacraments cannot cater for ‘living with provisionality’ when it comes to the validity of ordination and the Eucharist (cf. 3.6.32). We echo the view expressed about Anglican ecclesiology in 3.6.34: Catholic ecclesiology requires that the orders of our bishops and priests are not in doubt. Any continuing process of reception would imply that the orders of at least some bishops and priests could indeed be in doubt. From our perspective, therefore, we cannot comprehend the conclusion stated in 3.6.36: ‘Just as with the ordination of women to the priesthood, the orders of its women bishops would not be in doubt so far as the Church of England was concerned. Nevertheless, it would still remain open to the

possibility that its decision to ordain women bishops might in the end be judged unacceptable by the Church as a whole.’

Affirming the dignity, equality and complementarity of women

10. The Catholic Church in England and Wales welcomes the enhanced status of women which developed in the 20th century, and we certainly concur with the judgement that ‘very few people would now seek to resurrect the old arguments that women are by nature unsuited to exercise authority in the Church because they are less rational than men, or emotionally and morally weaker than men, and therefore more likely to be led astray from the path of Christian truth’ (3.1.20). There are clearly some arguments used in the past against ordaining women which must be rejected today. Catholic teaching strongly affirms the essential dignity, equality and complementarity of men and women (cf. 5.3.5), but shares the concern expressed in 3.4.27 (cf. 8.1.2) as to whether ‘the current emphasis on equality between men and women does not run the risk of overlooking the equally important biblical principle that men and women were created by God not to be interchangeable, but to be distinctive and complementary.’
11. Such matters are vitally important when it comes to discussing the iconic representational role of the priest and bishop. No adequate response can be given to either the ‘Catholic Anglican’ or the Roman Catholic perspective on the ordination of women without serious reflection on the implications of what it means for women and men to be equal in dignity but also complementary and distinctive. We concur with the view of those members of the Working Party who believe that ‘the particular questions relating to the ordination of women to the episcopate could not realistically and properly be addressed because there was a prior underlying question which had not been resolved, namely the lack of a corporately accepted Christian anthropology, which might provide the necessary theological understanding of the relationship of men and women in the redeemed community’ (5.4.2). This must involve ‘endeavouring to undertake an assessment of the freighting and value of traditional symbolic gender/role relations that is surely required by an incarnational religion which has hitherto found symbolic and differentiated sacramental expression’ (5.4.3).
12. There is also need for a clearer distinction in the Report between ‘ordained ministry’ and ‘leadership roles’, as there is a danger of *non sequiturs* in the development of the argument for the ordination of women to the episcopate. Whatever may have been the historical reality in much of the past, issues of ‘headship’ are not central to the Roman Catholic position on admitting women to ordained ministry. As is alluded to in 4.2.15, one has only to explore, for example, the role of many an abbess in the medieval church to realise that ‘power in things ecclesiastical’ was never been completely denied to women. Catholic teaching does not regard it as contradictory to advocate the development of leadership roles for women in the church while continuing to exclude the possibility of admitting women to ordained ministry.
13. The historical evidence presented for women in ordained ministry in the early Church needs to be treated with considerable caution (e.g. 3.5.23; 5.3.24; 5.3.25; 6.3.13). The conclusions of some writers are presented in places as though self-evident (e.g. 3.5.23), and yet the Report itself acknowledges regarding both biblical and historical evidence that there is ‘continuing disagreement between competent scholars about how the relevant material should be understood’ (5.5.1). At very least, ‘the scholarly discussion about the interpretation of the relevant passages of Scripture and the historical evidence from the Early Church is still inconclusive. Just as there is no consensus in the Church in general, so also there is no consensus among scholars on these issues’ (6.2.10). Even Ute Eisen is quoted as acknowledging that the evidence she gives for women being ‘extensively involved in the ministry of the Early Church’ has traditionally been interpreted differently (5.3.24).

Many of the conclusions drawn by such writers are open to serious challenge on purely scholarly grounds, sometimes involving creative speculation based on a paucity of evidence.

Development or evolution?

14. The Catholic Church affirms the dynamic nature of tradition, as expressed in 3.4.3 and 3.4.4. A distinction needs to be drawn, however, not only between ‘evolution’ and ‘revolution’ (3.5.12) but also between ‘development’ and ‘evolution’. The use of this distinction by C.F.D. Moule and others with regard to the genesis of Christology is relevant also, at least in Roman Catholic teaching, to the unfolding over the centuries – from the early church through the medieval period to today – of Christian doctrine on the nature of the Church and the sacraments, including Holy Orders (cf. C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, CUP 1977, Introduction). Catholic teaching regards the ordination of women as priests or bishops as a radical evolutionary step, breaking the historical continuity of ministry from the apostles down through the centuries, rather than as a legitimate and healthy progressive development clearly rooted in such continuity.

What is a bishop?

15. The Report rightly states that ‘any debate on whether women should be bishops in the Church of England needs to be informed by a clear understanding of the nature of episcopacy’ and that any ‘properly informed decision about whether this ministry is one that may legitimately be discharged by a women’ could not be made should such clarity in understanding be lacking (1.2.6). Despite presenting many important aspects of episcopal ministry on which most Anglicans are fully agreed, the Report itself casts considerable doubt as to whether a clear consensus on the nature of that ministry is in place. This is well summarised as follows:

Although there has ... been agreement on the requirement for episcopacy as a matter of agreed church polity, where Anglicans have continued to disagree is on the significance of episcopacy. This is a disagreement that goes back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (2.6.1)

These differences of opinion about the significance of episcopacy were never resolved within the Church of England. They became part of the Anglican tradition with the consequence that the existence of a range of views about episcopacy has been a feature of the Church of England ever since. (2.6.9)

The examples we have given clearly demonstrate that a range of views about the episcopate has existed in the Church of England since the sixteenth century and continues to exist today. It therefore raises the issue of whether there is such a thing as a ‘Church of England’ view of episcopacy. (2.7.1)

16. We recognise that such a range of views may be seen as consonant with the ‘comprehensive’ nature of the Anglican tradition, but the doctrinal differences between such opinions are far more radical than the range of theological viewpoints suggested in 2.7.2 to exist in the Roman Catholic Church. It may be wise for the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion to work towards an agreed understanding of the nature of episcopacy before progressing with a decision to ordain women as bishops. This seems important not only for the internal life of the Church of England, but also for the furthering, for example, of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant. A particular ecumenical concern is to what extent the range of views on the episcopate presented in the Report are consonant with what Anglican members of ARCIC I and II have agreed to in the statements on authority.

Sacramental representation & the maleness of Christ

17. Chapter 5 of the Rochester Report presents the arguments for and against introducing women bishops in the Church of England. The arguments for retaining the current stance are divided into two: those largely supported by people who are in the ‘Catholic Anglican tradition’ and those largely supported by people who are in the ‘Conservative Evangelical tradition’. As would be expected, modern Catholic teaching does not sit easily with some of the arguments presented as central to the ‘Conservative Evangelical’ opposition to the ordination of women. Roman Catholic arguments for not admitting women to ordination as bishops (or as priests) echo many, but not all, of those given from the ‘Catholic Anglican perspective’ in 5.2.5 - 5.2.29, and it is not our intention to repeat or elaborate those arguments in this response. We would not wish to identify with any suggestion that human society or the church are by nature ‘patriarchal’ (cf. 5.2.11), any more than we would with the ‘functional subordination’ of women to men suggested by some Conservative Evangelicals (5.2.32f).
18. Besides the argument from the unbroken historical continuity of tradition, the central arguments for Roman Catholic teaching are the sacramental or ‘iconic’ representational nature of ordained ministry, intimately linked with the symbolic significance of the maleness of Christ. All of this must be set within the need for a Christian anthropology clearly rooted in Scripture and tradition, while rejecting and moving on from any merely culture-bound discrimination against women from the past. Human sexual differentiation is indeed ‘part of the givenness of the human situation as created by God’ (5.2.11), and sexual imagery in the Scriptures and the Church’s tradition cannot be discarded without serious damage to the continuity of the apostolic and catholic faith. Catholic teaching agrees that ‘the maleness of Christ is Christologically significant’ (5.2.15), and the nuptial imagery of Bridegroom and Bride is important for understanding the sacramental representational of the priest and bishop. We would concur with the arguments expressed in 5.2.15 – 5.2.18, summed up as follows:

If a priest or bishop has an iconographic function as a representative of the incarnate Christ, particularly at the celebration of the Eucharist, then he has to be male for the representation to be appropriate. Just as the historical particularity of the Last Supper can only be properly represented by the use of bread and wine, so the historical particularity of the incarnation can only be properly represented by someone who is male. (5.2.16)

As stated in 5.2.18, this argument from ‘natural symbolism’ continues to be important in Roman Catholic teaching and theology. Sacraments are about symbolism in its richest sense, and an agreed theology of sacramentality is essential for any clear understanding of the nature of ordained ministry.

19. Such arguments are central to the ‘Catholic Anglican’ perspective on ordaining women as bishops, but little attention is given to these issues when the Report presents the counter-arguments, and it has to be asked whether they are given as much serious attention as the ‘Conservative Evangelical’ arguments. The issues about sacramental representation and the maleness of Christ are passed over very quickly in 5.3.38, and the question is simply left open in 5.5.1: ‘Does the maleness of Christ mean that he can only be represented by male bishops?’ This is a vital question for the debate, and needs much deeper study and a fuller response than given in the Report.

Sacramental assurance

20. As already mentioned in no. 7 above, the issue of sacramental assurance is of fundamental importance in Roman Catholic teaching, and is too vital for the life of the Church to be

something which can be put at risk. Assurance of the authenticity of the sacraments is of the *esse* of the Church in Catholic teaching, and the guarding of such sacramental assurance is a key responsibility of the bishops. The ordination of women to the priesthood has already led to the situation in which members of the Church of England can legitimately refuse to accept the sacramental ministry of some of its ordained ministers, ‘a situation which contradict(s) the very purpose for which Holy Orders exist’ (5.2.23). We agree with the position stated in 5.2.24 that the ordination of women as bishops could only make matters worse: ‘At the moment it is only the orders of female priests that are in question. If women were ordained as bishops episcopal orders would also be in question, as would the priestly or diaconal orders of anyone (male or female) ordained by a woman bishop’. This is well put by David Houlding as quoted in 5.2.25:

If dubiety exists in the priesthood, then the certainty of the sacraments, which are so celebrated, is called into question. You cannot - which is what the Catholic Church is saying, and so what the Church of England has also previously said – ‘try out’ sacraments. They are not experimental! It is of their very nature that they are trustworthy and authoritative. They are to be guaranteed signs of Christ’s presence and activity in the world.

This is consonant with the Roman Catholic understanding of sacramentality, and applies not only to Baptism and the Eucharist, but also to Ordination. The ordination of women as bishops would undoubtedly create a further major obstacle to any future mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries involving the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, but even within the present situation we share as an ‘ecumenical partner’ the concern of those who foresee irreparable damage to the internal visible and spiritual unity of the Church of England:

If women cannot be priests then they cannot be bishops. Doubts about the orders of women priests would therefore necessarily lead to doubts about the orders of women bishops. This would in turn lead to doubts about the validity of the episcopal functions performed by women ministers, which would lead to doubts about the orders of any priests (even male priests) whom they ordained, which would eventually lead to questions about the validity of ministerial orders and sacramental assurance becoming endemic throughout the Church of England. (7.2.14)

Collegial focus of unity

21. Although it can be argued that there is a lack of a clearly agreed understanding of the nature of episcopal ministry in the Report, one idea remains central: the bishop as focus of unity. A ministry of oversight, exercised in personal, collegial and communal ways, is seen as ‘necessary to witness to and safeguard the unity and apostolicity of the Church’ (2.1.4). There are clearly serious challenges to the exercise of this ministry when not all Anglicans in a diocese can accept the ministry of their bishop, but another point emerges strongly from the Report. The bishop is ‘not an isolated figure but part of a wider episcopal college’ (2.3.32; cf. 2.7.34). As Charles Gore summarises St Cyprian of Carthage, ‘the episcopate which belongs to each bishop belongs to him as one of a great brotherhood linked by manifold ties into a corporate unity’ (2.3.12). Bishops exercise their ministry *in solidum*, and this solidarity is of the very nature of an authentic episcopal ministry. The Report makes two important points about how Anglicans understand episcopal collegiality: ‘The college of which the Church of England bishops are a part is not confined to bishops of the Church of England. They are members of the college of bishops which consists of all the bishops of the Anglican Communion... Because of their consecration as bishops in the Church of God, bishops of the Church of England are also members of a college of bishops that embraces all bishops worldwide’ (2.7.50).

22. This seems to us to have at least two major implications. Firstly, Roman Catholic teaching understands membership of the Roman Catholic college of bishops to involve full rather than impaired communion between all bishops, and we do not understand how bishops can exercise their ministry *in solidum* when it is being suggested that some bishops in the Church of England (and the wider Anglican Communion) may not be able to recognise and accept the ministry of some of their fellow bishops. Such a situation cannot safeguard the unity of the Church.
23. Secondly, if the Church of England maintains that its bishops are also members of a worldwide college of bishops, which presumably includes Roman Catholic and Orthodox bishops, it may be difficult to justify making decisions about episcopacy in isolation from that wider college. The Report, however, states that when making the decision to ordain women as priests ‘in the end it was felt that Roman Catholic and Orthodox opposition should not be seen as a sufficient reason for the Church of England not to take this decision’ (4.2.49). If the same conclusion is drawn about the ordination of woman as bishops, it has to be asked what it really means for Anglican bishops to belong to a wider college. Should not decisions which radically affect the nature of that wider college be made *in solidum*? The impression is given in the Report that, despite that sense of wider membership, the only serious consideration given is to the current discernment of the Church of England in isolation. This is intimated early in the Report in 1.2.13:

Episcopal ministry has been exercised in many ways down the centuries and across the world. This report, however, focuses on the way in which episcopal ministry is understood and practised in the Church of England. This is because what is under consideration in this report is the issue of whether it is right for women to become bishops in the Church of England. The teaching and practice of other churches is noted when it is relevant to the consideration of this issue.

24. The Church of England is obviously free to make such a decision in isolation from its ecumenical partners, but such a decision has ecclesiological implications for how the Church of England understands its membership of the wider Anglican Communion and of the universal Church, as well as its understanding of episcopal ministry. Roman Catholics are particularly concerned about the ecumenical implications of the affirmation of ‘the right of the Church of England to develop its own orders’ (5.3.39f). This may well be ‘implied in the logic of the Reformation itself’ (Paul Avis quoted in 5.3.40), but it is difficult to harmonise with the texts and spirit of various bilateral ecumenical statements involving the Anglican Communion in recent years, including those of the Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission. We are also aware, however, that a decision to ordain women as bishops in the Church of England would enhance and progress other ecumenical ventures, especially the path set in motion by the Anglican-Methodist Covenant.
25. From our perspective as an ecumenical partner, working closely with the Church of England in many ways in this country, and often with good pastoral collaboration and personal friendship between individual Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, one of our primary concerns is that ‘the introduction of women bishops would lead to the rupturing of communion within the episcopate and thus destroy that very unity of the Church which bishops are meant to focus’ (5.2.28). For the sake of the spiritual life and the spreading of the Gospel message in our country, any further impairing of communion within the Church of England is not something we wish to see.

Ecclesiology

26. Many of our concerns are summed up in the last paragraph above, and point to the central ecclesiological questions which arise from the debate about the ordination of women as bishops. We question what kind of unity will exist in the Church of England, and the wider

Anglican Communion, after women bishops are ordained. Many of these issues are also raised in the 'Windsor Report' addressing the issue of the instruments of unity in the Anglican Communion. At its heart, the question concerns the nature of Anglican ecclesiology: by what kind of 'communion' is the Church of England in particular and the Anglican Communion in general held together as more than an increasingly loose federation of local churches?

27. In its Decree on Ecumenism, the Second Vatican Council introduced the idea of 'a certain though imperfect communion' existing in varying degrees between divided Christians. The notion of 'impaired communion' is one used to emphasise our baptismal unity in the one Church of Christ while still pursuing as our goal that full visible communion in faith, sacraments and ministry which we believe to be Christ's will for all his disciples. In this sense, Roman Catholic teaching finds it difficult to understand how there can be 'impaired communion' within a body of Christians bound together in a particular 'Communion' (e.g. the Anglican Communion). It seems as though concepts first used to express the baptismal unity of a visibly divided Christendom are now being used to express the damaged internal unity of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. Anglicans have always cherished their distinctive 'comprehensiveness' to enable a *via media* communion of Christians with often very different viewpoints, but this communion has been firmly rooted in a commonly-recognised ministry (of bishops and priests, seen as in historical continuity with the apostles) and the celebration of the Eucharist. Both of these crucial bonds have already been impaired by the ordination of women as priests, and will be further and radically impaired by the ordination of women as bishops.
28. The Report expresses the desire, whatever decision is made about ordaining women bishops, to maintain 'the highest possible degree of communion' within each diocese, within the Church of England and within the Anglican Communion. It remains open to question as to how high a degree of such communion will indeed be possible when the ministrations of some Anglican priests and bishops are not and will not be accepted by some members of the Church of England and wider Anglican Communion, and indeed by fellow priests and bishops. What degree of communion is required to ensure the viable and effective unity of a diocese, national church or worldwide communion? Roman Catholic teaching would see any breakdown of communion among bishops, and communion of people and priests with their bishops, as 'destructive of the communion between Christians which should be at the heart of the Church's life (4.3.6). Our fears are well summarised in 6.2.16:
- ... if the Church of England were to ordain women bishops this would increase the impairment of communion that already exists within the Communion over women priests, women bishops and other issues. It would exacerbate the process whereby the Communion ceases to be in any meaningful sense a communion of churches with common and interchangeable orders and becomes instead merely a loose federation of churches with a shared history but different and incommensurable polities.
29. What may become true within the Church of England is also to be feared within the Anglican Communion as a whole. This is something already discussed by the Eames Commission. The particular Roman Catholic understanding of itself as a Communion does not accept that it is legitimate for one part of the Communion to move forward on such matters without the agreement of the Communion as a whole (cf. 6.3.11). Such a decision would indeed involve a form of impaired rather than full communion, leading to a situation in which individual dioceses or provinces would struggle to maintain the 'highest possible degree of communion' with one another, eventually mirroring within the 'Communion' the divided visibility of Christendom.
30. The potential seriousness of the situation is illustrated in 7.3.12 in the context of the possible options for the future.

It is likely that there would be male bishops in the Church of England who would be conscientiously unable to recognise women bishops as being truly bishops and who would therefore be unable to be in communion with them as such.

In terms of traditional Anglican ecclesiology this would be an extremely grave situation because the collegiality and inter-communion between the bishops has been one of the means by which the Church of England has been held together as a single Church rather than each diocese constituting a church in its own right. If a people were unable to recognise a bishop of another diocese as being a validly ordained bishop and was in consequence unable to recognise episcopal actions performed by him or her, then the communion of those dioceses with each other would be very seriously impaired. This would also have important practical consequences in terms of matters such as the transferability of clergy between dioceses.

The way in which these passages are worded illustrates a point made earlier in this response. If there are doubts about whether women can be ordained bishops, and whether the decision to do so was right, then there are inevitable consequences for doubts about the validity of the orders and ministrations of those bishops. It cannot be held, as suggested in 3.6.36 (cf. 7.2.15), that if the decision is found to be wrong to ordain women bishops, the orders of those women bishops would not be in doubt. The passages above make it clear that some bishops, priests and people in the Church of England would refuse to accept the validity of the orders and certain ministrations of women bishops and those ordained by them.

31. The 1993 statement of the House of Bishops affirmed that ‘differing views about the ordination of women to the priesthood can continue to be held with integrity within the Church of England’, and committed itself to ‘accommodating a diversity of convictions, particularly in matters relating to the Church’s sacramental life’, while also maintaining the unity of the Church (4.2.43). As Catholic Bishops, from the perspective of our Roman Catholic ecclesiology, we do not understand how this is possible. Anglican life is rooted in ‘the pure Word of God being preached’ and ‘the Sacraments being duly ministered’. Traditional Anglican theology required the Eucharist to be celebrated by a duly ordained priest, and for such a priest to be ordained by a bishop understood to be in historical apostolic succession. If there are doubts about the ordination of either the bishop or priest, then it is difficult to be sure about the right administration of the Eucharist. There is a certain logic to the position presented in 4.3.17: ‘The place of bishops within Anglican ecclesiology means that if women were ordained as bishops it would be difficult to see how those opposed to women’s ordination could continue to exist within the Church of England.’
32. It is not for the Roman Catholic Church to propose practical options for how the Church of England can cater for a situation of impaired communion. In the light of the above comments, however, it is difficult to see how any solution such as the ‘Third Province’ can be understood as anything less than institutionalising schism and providing structures to enable a serious degree of impaired communion to co-exist within the continuing Church of England and Anglican Communion. It may be desirable for those unable to accept the decision ‘to live in the highest degree of communion possible’, but what is the lowest degree of such communion which is seen to ensure an acceptable degree of visible unity with the Church of England and Anglican Communion? Most Christians today, in their continuing divisions, wish to live together in the highest possible degree of communion, but it is largely recognised that there is a long way to go before we can speak of being ‘one Communion’ together. What degree of communion would a ‘Third Province’ have with the Provinces of Canterbury and York, and their Archbishops? 7.3.57 rightly raises serious questions about the viability of such an option, primarily regarding such a Province being ‘in communion’ with the Archbishop of Canterbury and its bishops being ‘in communion’ with the other bishops of the Church of England. Does ‘in communion’ mean ‘in full communion’, or ‘in

the highest degree of communion possible'? Once again, this is an essentially ecclesiological question: 'the ecclesiological problem of diocesan bishops being in a state of at least impaired communion with each other' (7.3.63).

Final Thoughts

33. Our view is that before proceeding with the decision to ordain women as bishops in the Church of England, the critical questions raised in 5.5.1 require further and deeper study. This is particular the case with the questions concerning ecclesiology (pages 181-2).
34. Our reflections in this document have been in direct response to the content of the Rochester Report, as invited by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on behalf of the House of Bishops of the Church of England. They are rooted in our specific Roman Catholic position on the ordination of women, and in our concern as an ecumenical partner for the internal unity of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. 'Maintaining as much unity as possible' is vital not only for the spiritual well-being and mission of each Christian community, but also for our ecumenical journeying together on the path to full unity in Christ. A decision by the Church of England to ordain women bishops would undoubtedly be a further obstacle on that path, but as Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Donald Coggan reminded us, although our divisions hinder our witness to the world and hinder the work of Christ, 'they do not close all roads we may travel together' (*Common Declaration*, 1977). We conclude by re-affirming our Roman Catholic commitment to our common pilgrimage of dialogue and unity, in the light of the final words of Pope and Archbishop together in 1977:

Christian hope manifests itself in prayer and action – in prudence but also in courage. We pledge ourselves and exhort the faithful of the Roman Catholic Church and of the Anglican Communion to live and work courageously in this hope of reconciliation and unity in our common Lord. (*Common Declaration*, 1977, n. 11)

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