



ANGLICAN - ROMAN CATHOLIC INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION (ARCIC)
COMMENTARY ON "LIFE IN CHRIST: MORALS, COMMUNION AND THE CHURCH"
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I. INTRODUCTION

Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church is the first joint statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission to deal specifically with moral issues. In the past, ecumenical dialogue focused on matters of doctrine; *Life in Christ* recognizes that "questions of doctrine and morals are closely inter-connected" (2). The dialogue was undertaken with the belief that "authentic Christian unity is as much a matter of life as of faith" (Preface). In both areas, dialogue has as its goal the restoration of full communion.

A continual theme in the document is that Anglicans and Roman Catholics "derive from the Scriptures and Tradition the same controlling vision of the nature and destiny of humanity and share the same fundamental moral values" (1). This is evidenced most clearly in those areas where there is a common witness, for example, on war and peace, euthanasia, freedom and justice. But these issues do not exhaust the moral life and when the focus is contraception, divorce and remarriage, abortion, or homosexuality, the "popular and widespread belief that the Anglican and Roman Catholic Communion are divided most sharply by their moral teaching" is legitimated (1). That is common to other ARCIC documents and stated explicitly in *Life in Christ*: "On the one hand, seeking a resolution of our disagreements is part of the process of growing together towards full communion. On the other hand, only as closer communion leads to deeper understanding and trust can we hope for a resolution of our disagreements" (99).

Ecumenical dialogue, however, cannot be satisfied with a mere catalogue of agreements and disagreements. Ecumenical dialogue must be aware that how problems are rationally and theologically framed stands in critical correlation to how they are resolved. The commentary below will focus on a number of themes within fundamental moral theology which, while not mentioned explicitly in the text, stand behind achieved agreements and still outstanding differences.

II. SHARED VISION AND COMMON HERITAGE

The document characterizes the moral life of the Christian as "a response in the Holy Spirit to God's self-giving in Jesus Christ". What this response consists of is "a communion with Christ and with one another" (4). True communion of persons shares in and reflects the mystery of divine life which is a "unity of self-communicating and interdependent relationships" (7). Being made in the divine image and called to participate in the life of God entails an understanding of human freedom that cannot be underestimated in the Christian vision of the moral life. Human freedom is corrupted when it "claims to be independent, wilful and self-seeking" (7). The freedom that is proper to human persons is a "freedom of responsiveness and interdependence" (7). In this way, those who are in Christ share "in God's creative and redemptive work for the whole of creation" (8).

As the document states, "Life in Christ is the gift and promise of new creation (2 Co 5:17), the ground of community, and the pattern of social relations" (4).

From the beginning of the document, the question of God is not accidental to the moral life of the Christian as in a truncated view of normative ethics. Nor is the question of God based on a naïve theology of revelation from which norms would be known directly. The focus is the meaning of the Incarnation as the self-revelation of God in history. Through Jesus' gift of himself in the Incarnation, a new solidarity among all persons is created. The Incarnation gives a new quality to human living and intercourse in such a way that participation in the life of God is mediated and witnessed in human solidarity and communion. The encounter with God through his Word made flesh entails a conception of moral insight whose contours can be briefly described.

Moral insight is not achieved in abstraction, but through the encounter and dialogue with the other. The commitment to enter into dialogue with other Christian traditions entails a recognition and respect for those traditions. By sustaining the conditions of dialogue as a way of life, mutual transformation and progress are possible. In the raising and answering of questions, positions can undergo critique, differences can be reconciled, new paradigms or ways of thinking can emerge, and elements of a tradition can be retrieved anew. Through the encounter with the other, then, the creative and innovative function of moral reasoning can gain new insights, achieve new standards of freedom,

and expand or reappraise possibilities of moral action. In this way, not only is ecumenical dialogue characterized by a sustained and enduring solidarity with the other, it bears a mark of hope and anticipation of future reconciliation.

Ecumenical dialogue is an open-ended enterprise. It is no surprise either that ecumenical dialogue will be marked by an attitude of tolerance which is not the result of indifference, but of the recognition of the historicity of knowledge.

The historical process of moral insight has an immediate impact on the use of natural law arguments in moral theology. Natural law arguments result from "reflection on experience of what makes human beings, singly and together, truly human" (9). What this means, of course, will depend upon the underlying metaphysics of human nature. In the recent past, the controlling paradigm of an essentialist metaphysics has been completed by a personalist one. "The fundamental moral question, therefore, is not 'What ought we to do?', but 'What kind of persons are we called to become?'" (6). Moral norms share in this personalist understanding of metaphysics. Rather than reflecting a closed system that can be transferred across time and place, the meaning of moral norms share in the dialectic between experience and insight. Moral norms have a prophylactic role; they protect an underlying vision of human flourishing. The ongoing plausibility and communicability of this vision shares in the dialectic between experience and insight.

The document makes an honest appraisal of the theology present in the manuals that existed before the Second Vatican Council. There is no doubt that Scripture is a central source of moral insight. The question concerns the epistemological interest which guides its usage. Before the Council, moral theology was marked with a hermeneutically naive use of Scripture. scriptural arguments remained on the periphery of moral discourse because the underlying notion of science that was found in the manuals emphasized the rationality and universalisability of its arguments. The analysis of the moral act was under the sway of the casuistic categories of Alphonse Liguori (44).

The renewal of moral theology since the Vatican Council has been free of these limitations. This does not mean that Scripture is a source for moral norms in a direct way; Scripture is insufficient in terms of both moral content and methodology. But it raises the question of how Scripture impacts on moral reasoning. How is the mind of Christ mediated in history? How does it give shape and direction to the practical life of the community (23)? How is it reflected in the insight, reflect the theological interest in newness. The theological background is not only Jesus' critique of the Law on the Sermon on the Mount, especially in the secondary antithetic statements, but the new competency that is given to the Christian when faced with conflict and limitations. Examples are found already in Scripture: the radical command to love one's enemies (*Mt* 5:43) or the command to place no limits on forgiveness (*Mt* 18: 21-22). The motivation for such actions is clear: the disciples imitation of the unbounded goodness and mercy of God (*Mt* 5: 48). This motivation, however, is not detached from normative content as in a normative theory that focuses exclusively on categorical action. The newness of Christ has put into motion a new history of insight that extends from the achievement of new standards of freedom by which goods are weighed to the communication of better and liberating alternatives of action. In this way, Christian moral reasoning and discernment have an emancipatory character.

Ecumenical dialogue is one area where the creative and reconciling character of moral reasoning will be evident.

III. AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT

The longest pari of the document deals with four issues on which the Anglican and Roman Catholic Communion diverge. The two moral issues on which there has been official disagreement are marriage after divorce, contraception. Disagreement is perceived to exist on issues of abortion and homosexuality. In all cases, however, conflicts are on the level of practical judgements rather than fundamental values (83, 84). Since each of these problems engage central themes in fundamental moral theology, each will be dealt with individually.

a) *Marriage After Divorce and Contraception*

Before addressing the specific problems of marriage after divorce and contraception, the document underscores the understanding of marriage and sexuality held in common by the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions. There are four basic points of agreement. First, there is a moral significance to the body in such a way than sexuality is an integral pari of one's moral identity. Hence, a person's sexuality "embraces the whole range of bodily, imaginative, affective and spiritual experience; "it enters into a person's deepest character and relationships" (55); and it must be integrated "into an ordered pattern of life" (56, 57). Secondly, sexual differentiation gives "bodily expression to the vocation of God's children to inter-personal communion"; human sexuality "constitutes a fundamental mode of human communication" (55). Thirdly, human sexuality is ordered to "the creation of life" (55). Through the procreation and nurturing of children couples share in the life-giving generosity of God (58). Finally, sex, love and procreation are all understood within a social as well as an interpersonal context (58). The document admits the institution of marriage has fostered the oppression and domination of women, but both traditions continue to see in marriage a "God-given pattern and significance" (59).

Against this common understanding of marriage and sexuality the document deals with the problem of marriage after divorce. Though Anglicans and Roman Catholics share a long and common history before the break in communion, the understanding of marriage has a unique history for each tradition (65-72). Both Communion agree

than marriage is a sacrament, though in different ways. Roman Catholics recognize a sacramental marriage to exist between two baptized persons; Anglicans extend the notion of sacramentality beyond the boundaries of the Church to be recognized in all valid marriage (62, 77). Clearly, these emphases are complementary (62). The document identifies the difference between the two Communions as one of balance in terms of law and pastoral practice. On the one hand, for Roman Catholics “the institution of marriage has enjoyed the favour of the law. Marriages are presumed to be valid unless the contrary case can be clearly established”, through, for instance, established canonical and pastoral norms (76). On the other hand, for Anglicans there is closer attention given “to the actual character of the relationship between husband and wife” (75).

In striking the proper balance between these two tendencies, one fundamental moral concern is the meaning of an irrevocable life choice. A life-decision reflects the truth about oneself and it fixes the boundaries of future meaningful action. A life-decision reflects the freedom to shape one’s unique and personal history. One reverses a life-decision with the risk of losing any consistency in life. At the same time, a life-decision is not a decision made in isolation. It is made in response to the encounter with the other. A life-decision grows and matures in relation to the other. This is especially true in marriage. Here the sacramentality of the relationship reflects and embodies the incarnational character of God’s revelation. In this way, the newness of Jesus enters into one’s life-decision and is seen in one’s unlimited dedication to the other, and willingness to reconcile difficulties in a life-long bond. Church teaching and discipline must be seen as safeguarding these truths.

In turning to the enduring problem of contraception, the document again reiterates agreements before specifying differences. Neither the Anglican nor the Roman Catholic tradition countenance an unprincipled separation of the unitive and procreative goods of marriage (78, 81). The issue of contraception is discussed within the context of responsible parenthood (79). Responsible parenthood requires family planning. Both Communions agree that there may be serious reasons for a couple never to have children; “indeed, there are some circumstances in which it would be morally irresponsible to do so” (79). Both agree that responsible parenthood will require dialogue between husband and wife, and between the family and society. The disagreement between the two Communions is in how this responsibility may be exercised. For Anglican teaching, the procreative good is a norm that governs “the married relationship as a whole” (80). Roman Catholic teaching, however, requires that “each and every marriage act must be open to the transmission of life” (*Humanae Vitae*, 11). The focus of this debate is the meaning of “the moral integrity of the act of marital intercourse” (81, 82).

One immediate and welcome advantage of raising the issue of contraception within an ecumenical context is that this issue is seen as a moral and not merely an *ecclesiological* problem. Contraception has been an obstinate problem both theologically and pastorally within Roman Catholicism. Fortunately, the document’s succinct statement of differences about contraception is devoid of the acrimony and scurrility that has made discussion about it within the Roman Catholic tradition difficult. However there is a problem when dealing with the issue of contraception solely on the level of official teaching, at least from a Roman Catholic perspective. Though authoritative Roman Catholic teaching has been reiterated in recent magisterial texts, ecumenical dialogue must account for an honest evaluation of the reception of that teaching. The communicability of the Church’s natural law teaching depends in part upon the adequacy of that teaching to the experience of married couples (38). The question is what level of agreement is necessary to warrant fuller communion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics (49)?

Further, when considering the Roman Catholic tradition on contraception, the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality that was “continued and developed” in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Humanae Vitae* must not be overlooked. The Second Vatican Council underlined the equality of “conjugal love” and “the responsible transmission of life” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51). Pope Paul VI reaffirmed that love and procreation are the “two great realities of married life” (*Humanae Vitae*, 7). The Church’s recent stress on the interpersonal aspects of sexuality, in addition to its procreative capacity reflects and enables a personalist revisioning of sexuality. Sex has the power to communicate and enhance the intimacy of the couple.

The language of sex as language is one way to express the communicative character of human sexuality. The linguistic metaphor is explicit in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. Similar to others who understand sex as the language of the body, John Paul II emphasizes that “fecundity is the fruit and sign of conjugal love, the living testimony of the full reciprocal self-giving of the spouses” (28). Within the Pope’s personalist revisioning of sexuality, however, the traditional proscription is reasserted. Hence, those couples who use artificial contraception to fulfil their duty of responsible parenthood “‘manipulate’ and degrade human sexuality... by altering its value of ‘total’ self-giving. Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other” (32). The magisterium’s use of more personalist categories in the area of sexuality remains accidental to the actual content of the Church’s moral norms.

Because Roman Catholic teaching has benefitted from the personalist revisioning of sexuality in terms of language, future dialogue on the issue of contraception will benefit from closer contact with the philosophy of language. One point deserves mention. There is an ambivalence to language; words are not univocal in meaning. In this way, a language is a living reality. Words receive new and different meanings, and old meanings are discarded; new contexts arise and give the same word new content. The historicity inherent to language must be transferred

legitimately to the language of the body.

The fundamental moral issue behind the discussion of contraception is the relationship of person and nature. The understanding of this relationship will depend upon epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions. A renewed philosophy of nature could serve as the condition for future dialogue on contraception, as well as other moral issues, especially in bioethics. When placed within an essentialist metaphysics, nature is given priority over the personal. Within a personalist metaphysics, however, nature is not seen as the static cosmocentric determination of activity; there is an ontological priority of the person. Nature is under determined; nature is interpreted in terms of the person. As the document states later, "nature is not infinitely malleable" (94); nature is not manipulated arbitrarily, but in a way to insure that it serves the good of the person. In this way, the order of nature is subordinated to the order of freedom.

Similar reflections can be made on the discussion of "prohibitions to which there are no exceptions" or "intrinsically disordered" acts (52). The fundamental moral question concerns the metaphysics of the moral act. Under the influence of juridic casuistry and the modern notion of science, the moral object centered on the *finis operis*. The *finis operantis* was relegated to the psychology of action. This is reinforced by the epistemological option of realism than was at work in the manuals of moral theology. Within a personalist metaphysics, however, the phenomenal aspect of the act is ambiguous; it receives its moral determination from the normative context within which it is interpreted. Like nature, the phenomenal aspect of the act is a necessary but not a sufficient criterion of normativity. Within this personalist metaphysics, the *finis operantis* is no longer relegated to the psychology of the act, but constitutes the moral object. In this way, the notion of *intrinsece malum* is removed from a reductive normative theory and placed within the dialectical structure of experience and insight.

b) *Abortion and Homosexuality*

A third moral problem is abortion. Both the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions recognize "the sanctity and right to life" (85, 86), and back this claim with evidence from Scripture, Tradition, and natural reason. For instance, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* can be recalled to support the theological claim that human life is sacred (4). In the Roman Catholic tradition, this first premise is coupled with a second which claims that the "human embryo must be treated as a human person" (*Donum Vitae*, 1987 and *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, 1974). The conclusion is straightforward: "Roman Catholic teaching rejects all direct abortion" (85). In the Anglican tradition, there is "no agreed teaching concerning the precise moment from which the new human life developing in the womb is to be given the full protection due to a human person" and so there is a less clear proscription against abortion in conflict situations (85).

Recent theological reflection on abortion has centered on two issues whose clarification will contribute to future dialogue among the churches, and between the churches and society. The first issue is the moral status of the embryo. Both traditions would agree that human life begins at conception; whether the embryo is personal life, however, is not a question of empirical verification (*Declaration on Procured Abortion*, 13, n. 19). One can recall the traditional definition of person given by Boethius – *persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia*. Under this definition, if there is a doubt about individuation there is a doubt about personhood. Does the embryo possess the physical preconditions of individuation? If not, the line demarcating personhood can be drawn at the time of implantation. But theologians need to question the sufficiency of this definition. This is an area in which traditional philosophical tools need to be refined in terms of a processual notion of substance.

The second issue concerns how the problem of abortion is construed methodologically. Rather than leaving pastoral efforts against abortion to be guided almost exclusively by calls for laws prohibiting taking the life of the fetus, there have been attempts to bring the social teaching of the Church to bear on this issue. Encouraging reflection on a social context wider than legal prohibitions does not lessen the proscriptive force of the norm against abortion. Rather, when an issue is cast in a new context, new ways of acting can emerge. Already in the *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, there are calls for policies to help families, unmarried mothers, and children (26).

There are some clear advantages to discussing abortion as a social issue, also. Making the protection of children, the welfare of mothers, and the support of families the context for discussing abortion offers a theological critique of the language of rights that is characteristic of liberal culture in general, and the issue of abortion in particular. This critique of modernity can be said to be behind the shared Anglican and Roman Catholic "abhorrence of the growing practice in many countries of abortion on grounds of mere convenience" (85). Because there is no descriptive or empirical backing for this statement, its meaning remains ambiguous. In light of the social teaching of the churches, it would be wrong to interpret it to mean that the churches are not concerned with the causes of abortion, or that they underestimate the tragic situations that are factors any time a woman faces an unintended pregnancy. Secondly, seeing abortion as a social issue will give the churches an increased respectability when they state their position on abortion in the public forum. Even those who differ on the morality of abortion will be attentive to the social and economic forces that play a role in women having abortions. By creating a sense of shared obligation to children, this methodological construal of the problem fosters cooperation among various ecclesial and civic groups to create the necessary alternatives to abortion. Finally, when abortion is placed in a social context, the sacrifice that is required of the woman in "following one's conscience in obedience to the law of God" will require a commensurate sacrifice on the part of the community as a whole (*Declaration on Procured Abortion*, 26).

The final moral problem mentioned by the document, homosexuality, focuses on other themes central to fundamental moral theology. Both Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions “affirm that a faithful and lifelong marriage between a man and woman provides the normative context for a fully sexual relationship”; both traditions “appeal to Scripture and the natural order as the sources of their teaching” in regard to homosexuality (87). The task for theological reflection is to clarify how Scripture and the natural order or, more broadly, how revelation and human experience relate to each other and contribute to normative evaluations concerning homosexuality.

On the other hand, Scripture does not contain a detailed sexual ethic. Methodologically, it is not appropriate simply to have immediate recourse to references to homosexuality in Scripture as evidence for definitive proscriptions that can be transferred to a contemporary situation and held as normative for all Christians. Recent Roman Catholicism, for instance, does not ignore historical-critical scholarship (cf. *The interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, I, A). Catholics are aware, for example, that scholars interpret the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen 19:1-28*) to refer primarily to a condemnation of inhospitality rather than homosexuality. Recent official Catholic documents (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2357), while finding support in the Scriptures, do not derive moral teaching immediately from particular texts; rather, they base the Church’s position directly on the Tradition and the natural law.

On the other hand, a heterosexual, permanent and procreative norm is gained from Scripture as a whole (58). Paradigmatic in this regard are the creation narratives in the book of Genesis. In both the Priestly and Yahwist accounts, humankind is created male and female making sexual differentiation constitutive of humanity. Sexual differentiation is the presupposition for the divine command “be fruitful and multiply” (*Gen 1:28; 55*). In the New Testament, though Jesus does not mention homosexuality, there is undoubtedly a positive view of marriage and the family (*Mt 22:1-14; Jn 2:1-11; Lk 11:1-2*). St. Paul’s apparent negative perspective on sexuality (*I Co 7:25-40*) must be interpreted in light of the anticipation of the Lord’s imminent return to avoid anything that detracts from single-hearted devotion to God. At the same time, Paul compares the faithful love required in marriage to the relation of Christ to his Church (*Eph 5:21-33*).

Moral reflection has to look at how authoritative these scriptural backings are when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. Certainly, there has to be explication of why and how the “norm” of heterosexual love differs from other, more dubious, orientations in Scripture, such as patriarchy. Furthermore, while providing a normative orientation, these backings have also to be related to other biblical themes. Christian life is to be modeled on the life of Jesus, thoroughly imbued with the qualities of faithfulness, self-sacrificing love, service to others, a readiness to forgive, etc. These qualities of relationship may be exemplified in both heterosexual and homosexual love.

The second source for the proscription against homosexuality is “the order of nature”. The appeal to the natural law in moral reasoning should not be confused with appeals to the laws of nature as they might be determined by other sciences. The proscription against homosexuality is dependent upon an underlying anthropology of human sexuality and the meaning of the sexual acts. The *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, issued by the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1975 holds that “according to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality”, i.e., procreation (5). Nature is filtered through and individual acts are interpreted by this anthropological option. In this way, the document rejects the claim “that homosexual relationships and married relationships are morally equivalent, and equally capable of expressing the right ordering and use of the sexual drive” (87).

The issue of homosexuality can be a test case for another interest in fundamental moral theology which concerns the dialogue between morality and the empirical sciences. This is an issue that is mentioned but not explored in the document, and is a possible source for differences in either moral casuistry or in public discourse concerning homosexuality and other issues (83). In light of the results of the other sciences – specifically psychology, anthropology, and sociology – moral theology is in the position of being an *apprentice*. The plausibility of theological argument depends on giving descriptive or empirical content to its normative claims. One valuable insight of psychology to normative reasoning is the distinction between a homosexual orientation by which a person may be confirmed in a sexual orientation by factors beyond his or her control, and homosexual acts which refer to genital intimacy.

At the same time, however, moral theology is in the position of being a *tutor*. Normativity cannot be reduced to the results of the empirical sciences; it must be remembered that not only are there other sciences, but there are different tendencies or schools within the sciences. The results of the other sciences will be evidence of the normative order to the extent that they confirm and protect an underlying anthropological project.

IV. CONCLUSION

Life in Christ does not resolve any of the outstanding differences between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church; that is clearly beyond the goals of the Commission. The differences analyzed here always must be contextualized within the broad range of agreement that exists between the Communion. Differences “do not reveal a fundamental divergence in our understanding of the moral implications of the Gospel” (101). Anglican and

Roman Catholics are not moral strangers (102). Drawing attention to the substantial agreements shared by the two Communion, however, is not to imply that remaining differences are accidental or merely casuistic. There is no clear division between the levels of reflection. Remaining differences between the two Communion on the issues discussed in *Life in Christ* are based on differing conceptions of the relationships between metaphysics and history, person and act, person and nature, and norms and conflict situations. These themes are present in a tacit way in the judgements on the various issues discussed in *Life in Christ*. These themes offer a fertile ground for future dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. Explicit focus on them will underscore further agreement, identify sources of disagreement, and open up avenues of reconciliation.

What the efforts of the Commission have shown is that if life in Christ is a communion already present, it is also an eschatological goal found anticipatorily in the present (96). What this means is that the moral demands of the Gospel do not exist over and above a particular location; “members of the Church share a responsibility for discerning the action of the Spirit in the contemporary world, for shaping a truly human response, and for resolving the ensuing moral perplexities with integrity and fidelity to the Gospel” (97). The full communion that is hoped for will not be coerced or imposed, but will come only through dialogue. Dialogue not only anticipates but is the means for achieving full communion. The questioning interaction that dialogue entails is the means of correcting distortions of communication, recontextualizing differences, and discovering better and redemptive alternatives of action.

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