

The Chaplain writes...*about our unity in Christ*

It was on 10 June 1969, almost 50 years ago, that Pope Paul VI visited the World Council of Churches here in Geneva. Now, after much water has passed under the Ecumenical bridges not all of it happily, on another June day this year, Pope Francis also came.

In 1969, Paul VI spoke at the time of a *long awaited dawn* in relationships. And there is no doubt that the intervening years have seen much in the way of progress between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as between other parts of the Church and the See of Rome. I have, over that same period of time, watched closely such developments as well as being involved in the ecumenical movement both locally and internationally. We have had many agreements on doctrines which were thought once to be divisive. We are now into the third round of ARCIC discussions – the Anglican Roman Catholic International Consultation which has produced reports outlining substantial agreement on matters from the Eucharist to Ministry to the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Faith and Morals and to – perhaps the most vexed and yet most substantial – Authority in the Church. The latest, just over a year ago, is entitled *Walking together on the Way – learning to be Church locally, regionally, universally* and was finalised at a meeting of the Commission in Erfurt in Germany, the place where Martin Luther was ordained and entered monastic life.

Over the last fifty years, I have felt great pain that all this talk, all this agreement, seems to go nowhere at all. Nor will it, I believe, all the time that we are impeded by – on the one hand intransigence in the bureaucratic structures of the Vatican, and equally on the other hand by the pseudo-parliamentary debates of our General Synod and other such bodies through the Anglican Communion.

Jesus said *the truth shall make you free*. And perhaps it is in the area of discord between rival groups (and sadly that is what we are) within the life of the Church that we need to learn that above all else. I do believe that the ARCIC model of studying together to get behind these old rivalries, slogans and divisive words is the right way forward for the whole Church. For that is the way in which we discover the *truth that will make us free*. Free from the stupid and destructive divisions that hamper and invalidate what should be Christ's work amongst us.

The other thing that I believe we should do comes out of prayer. Jesus teaches us to *pray* and in particular he reminds us to *forgive* if we wish to be *forgiven*. If we wish to be *free* we have to let go of some things. In relationships, it's no use holding on to past hurts and resentments. We *have* to forgive. Or suffer the consequences personally. But it's only possible to forgive if we know what it is ourselves to be forgiven.

Maybe that is something as differing parts of the one Church that we really have to learn. There's been some controversy in the local press about the Mass that Pope Francis celebrated at Palexpo. I myself was there, in the event. Some other non Roman Catholic participants have said very publicly that they find it very difficult to be refused holy Communion. And yes, I sympathise. It is a great pain to attend Mass and not be able to receive holy Communion. I understand the reasons that the Roman Church adduces for this, about ecclesial identity and all the rest. As Anglicans, once we said something similar. But for the last 50 years, we have progressively taken down such barriers, to such an extent that we don't even think about this any more. We welcome our sisters and brothers in Christ, not because everyone has the right ideas about the Eucharist. Because almost certainly they wouldn't have. Even if we actually could say *exactly* what the right ideas about the Eucharist are! We welcome our sisters and brothers because

they are sisters and brothers *in Christ*. And this has been and continues to be a rich blessing!

Who do we, or did we, think we are or were protecting by having a rigid policy of exclusion from Communion those who don't sign up to a particular ecclesial identity or who follow the rules of that particular body? Do we think we are protecting Christ our victorious Risen Lord? Of course we pay heed to what Paul says about Eucharistic participation – but the context was and is rather different!

I don't think the Risen Christ needs our protection. Though maybe *we do* – from his gaze as he looks on our silliness.

May we all be one. And soon – for no part of Christ's Church can afford the luxury of division. Even if such division were not in itself, as I believe it to be, gravely sinful.

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