

Tensions in Anglican – Roman Catholic Dialogue Doctrinal and Moral Absolutes 1980–2020

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Abstract

The article surveys Anglican – Roman Catholic ecumenical relationships from 1980–2020. It examines the belief in doctrinal and moral absolutes in official statements of the CDF, and the impact this had on documents from ARCIC. This was different from statements from the PCPCU, especially in relationship to WCC texts. The article concludes by looking at the changes since the election of Pope Francis, and whether ecumenical relationships will be different in the future.

Key words

ecumenism – Anglicanism – Roman Catholicism – CDF – ARCIC – WCC – moral absolutes – historicism – *sensus fidelium*

Introduction: Coherence and Tradition in Tension with Ecumenical Dialogue¹

The period of Anglican – Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue from 1980 to 2020 was marked over these four decades by a slow cooling of relationships,

¹ I am grateful to the Rev. Professor Vimal Tirimanna, C.S.S.R., Professor Paul Murray and the Rev. Professor Paul Avis, for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. A shorter version was first given at a conference on Anglican – Roman Catholic relations at The Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University, in September 2019, as a response to Sr. Professor Susan Wood, S.C.L.

a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as an 'ecumenical winter'.² Nevertheless, this period also marked a time of subtle change, which has often gone unnoticed. Despite the difficulties caused in Anglican – Roman Catholic relationships by the questions of the ordination of women and of same-sex relationships, there was a definite change of tone in the official dialogue from 2014 onwards. This was not simply due to the election of Pope Francis, although that was very significant. The changed tone was also because of a gradual relaxation of the traditional commitment to doctrinal and moral absolutes on the Roman Catholic side, though this is my own inference from the documents themselves, rather than being contained in an official statement. My inference is found in a close reading of many Roman Catholic documents, both moral and ecclesiological. Among them are the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of April 2016; the prominence given within the Roman Catholic Church to its official response to the World Council of Churches document *The Church – Towards A Common Vision*; and finally the welcome given in the official Roman Catholic commentary on the first text from the third Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), *Walking Together on the Way*.³ As Duke Ellington once said, 'Things ain't what they used to be.'

This article argues a case for this interpretation, although it remains a tentative change which could of course be reversed in decades to come. Nor has this change of tone in the documents resulted in any change of formal relations between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Personal warmth between church leaders is undeniable, but it makes no difference to what is canonically permitted or prohibited. Nevertheless, a change has happened. To borrow Charles Taylor's typology: bodies can become porous and open to the influence of others or closed (Taylor's term is buffered) and self-contained.⁴ Taylor's argument is that modernity has made the individual self unable to receive from others, and therefore rendered the self non-porous. This tendency causes a decline in spirituality and religious belief. Taylor is talking of individuals, but I am

2 Michael Hurley, 'The Winter of Ecumenism', *The Furrow* 61.1 (January 2010), pp. 30–40.

3 Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016) 31 (hereafter cited in text as *AL*): https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf. Response of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity to *The Church: Towards A Common Vision*: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/notizie-2019/2019-10-23-tctcv-catholic-response.html>. *Walking Together on the Way: Anglican and Catholic Official Commentaries on the arcic Agreed Statement*: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-iii/arcic-iii---documents/2018-walking-together-on-the-way---commentary.html>.

4 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 37–42.

applying his typology to ecclesial bodies. If bodies are porous, they are open to external influences, resulting in reduced internal coherence. My argument is that, although the Roman Catholic Church was central in past centuries to spirituality in the West, as an institution it was extremely self-contained, or buffered. Much of its energy was spent on preserving this internal state as a matter of theological integrity.

The Roman Catholic Church possessed strong doctrinal and moral cohesion until late in the twentieth century. The question of how the preservation of this cohesion is related to the documents of Vatican II is the subject of many books and articles, and cannot detain us here.⁵ In spite of Vatican II, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) retained great power in the half-century after the Council. The 1982 dismissal by the CDF of the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission's (ARCIC) texts on the eucharist and ministry was perhaps not a surprise.⁶ This is not to say that the Roman Catholic Church did not enter ARCIC in good faith in the 1960s. It had perfectly good intentions, but its goal was, I think, to see whether Anglican eucharistic and sacerdotal doctrine formulated in a different historical age were compatible with the Roman Catholic inheritance. As the Malta Report, which initiated the dialogue, said:

We agree that revealed Truth is given in holy Scripture and formulated in dogmatic definitions through thought-forms and language which are historically conditioned. We should examine further and together both the way in which we assent to and apprehend dogmatic truths and the legitimate means of understanding and interpreting them theologically.⁷

The Anglican Communion enjoyed less coherence than the Roman Catholic Church owing to the long-running tension between evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics, but nevertheless a deep internal coherence, both in doctrinal and moral theology, pertained. When formal ecumenical dialogue got under way in the 1960s between the two Communion, each prized its own coherence and identity. It was unclear whether this was capable of being negotiated, or

5 Massimo Faggioli and Andreas Vicini, S. J. (eds), *The Legacy of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015).

6 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Observations on the Final Report of ARCIC, 1982*. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19820327_animadversiones_en.html.

7 <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/commissione-preparatoria/testo-in-inglese.html>, paragraphs 5–6.

whether each side hoped that its own congruity was in some unspecified way able to be held alongside a form of ecumenical reconciliation.

George Lindbeck argued on these lines in *The Nature of Doctrine* in 1984. Doctrines function as grammatical rules within a particular ecclesial tradition, yet can be recast in the 'transformative context of ecumenical dialogue'.⁸ The question is whether this transformation would happen beyond the members of the ecumenical dialogue, or whether non-reception would be the default position, thus preventing any transformation, as Lindbeck hoped. This article argues that some transformation and mutual reception has begun to take place during the last few years, although it is a very uncertain Spring.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Attitude to Ecumenism, 1982–2000

Much to the disappointment of many Anglicans and Roman Catholics, the Roman Catholic Church, through the CDF, eventually completely rejected ARCIC's document on the Eucharist in 1982. I remember the chastened feel of ARCIC when it held a public meeting in Durham in August 1984, two years after the CDF response. The hurt was still evident. The CDF had written that ARCIC's text was deficient. In their view, it would have been helpful in order to permit Roman Catholics to see their faith fully expressed on this point, to make clear that the 'real presence of the sacrifice of Christ, accomplished by the sacramental words, that is to say by the ministry of the priest saying *in persona Christi* the words of the Lord, includes a participation of the Church, the Body of Christ, in the sacrificial act of her Lord, so that she offers sacramentally in him and with him his sacrifice'.⁹ The Roman Catholic response aimed to make clear that the priest brought into being the Eucharist in the person of Christ, rather than simply presiding over the congregation. The Eucharist is, in the words of the CDF, an action where the priest 'offers sacramentally the redemptive sacrifice of Christ'. The CDF was also concerned at the lack of propitiatory language. Citing documents from the Council of Trent and Pope John Paul II's *Domenicae Cenae* of 1980 as evidence of the priest's complete sacramental identification with Christ's sacrifice, the CDF insisted that the priesthood of the ordained ministry depended on the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist or

8 Andrew McGowan, 'Harvesting- in an "ecumenical winter"?', *Centro* 16.1 (2010). George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

9 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Observations on the Final Report of ARCIC*.

Mass.¹⁰ Christ himself instituted the order of priesthood; it was not an order which developed over time, in the view of the CDF.¹¹

The response of the CDF has been much studied. Margaret O' Gara examined the rejection by the CDF in its preliminary 1982 *Observations* of ARCIC's view of reception. The CDF complained that ARCIC made reception by the faithful a 'final indication' of the value and authority of any definition as a genuine expression of the faith. Against this view, the CDF cited *Pastor Aeternus* of Vatican I, and *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II, as giving the teaching office of the Church, and no one else, the exclusive task of interpreting the Word of God.¹² In its 1991 response, which was its definitive statement, the same note was struck. In responding to ARCIC's *Final Report*, the CDF was pleased that ARCIC held that reception 'does not create truth nor legitimize the decision.' However, the CDF held that 'the certain knowledge of a defined truth is not guaranteed by the reception of the faithful ... but by the authoritative definition itself on the part of the authoritative teachers.'¹³ O'Gara points out that ARCIC only ever claimed that reception was an 'ultimate indication' of freedom from error. It never used the concept of 'guarantee'. The CDF however ascribed this term to ARCIC and consequently rejected the *Final Report*. It was a way of setting up a 'straw man' and demolishing it. As O'Gara says, the CDF correctly rejected any possibility of relativism, where knowledge is constructed by the self, but its own position seemed to see knowledge of revelation as entrusted to an authoritative subject (the *magisterium*) which is illuminated by divine truth. This absolutism does not allow any possibility of other ways of knowledge, so ecumenical relations cannot progress beyond a certain good will on both sides.¹⁴ The CDF was clear that its account of the Church's teaching 'is given in a definitive way, within the range of all truth revealed by God.'¹⁵

However, not all ecumenical relations were marked by this strong defence of ecclesial tradition. In the same year as the CDF's rejection of ARCIC's text

10 Pope St John Paul II, *Dominicae Cenae (The Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist)*, 1980: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19800224_dominicae-cenae.html.

11 Mark Langham, *The Caroline Divines and the Church of Rome: A Contribution to Current Ecumenical Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2017).

12 Margaret O'Gara, 'Two Accounts of Reception', in John J. Liptay and David S. Liptay (eds), *The Importance of Insight: Essays in Honour of Michael Vertin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 117.

13 <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-i/risposte-ai-lavori-di-arcic-i/testo-in-inglese2.html>.

14 O'Gara, 'Two Accounts of Reception', p. 118.

15 <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-i/risposte-ai-lavori-di-arcic-i/testo-in-inglese2.html>.

there was the hugely important World Council of Churches (WCC) document *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM.), which led to a deeper understanding of apostolicity and ministry. Interestingly, the WCC text came out on 15 January 1982. The CDF *Observations* was published on 27 March 1982. Just over two months separated these two reports, but the WCC one belonged to a different era. Clearly how one evaluates the two reports depends on one's theology. In terms of ecclesiology, the Vatican responded positively to *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry* through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) in 1988.¹⁶ This body is however subservient to the CDF, and that means that until very recently any response by the PCPCU was not the final word of the Vatican on any matter.

What the PCPCU asked for on the WCC. text was further work on sacramentality, authority and the validity of orders. They found much to praise in the document, especially the section on the Eucharist. The difficulties lay in the fundamental ecclesiological dimension of the recognition of the ordained ministry. It required 'newly gained convictions about God's will and the guidance of the Holy Spirit regarding the constitutive features of church order, the episcopal succession and its exercise in ordination'.¹⁷ In other words, while praising the theology of the sacraments, the issue resolved itself into one of the proper exercise of ecclesial authority.

The Vatican's response to BEM was published in 1988. In 2000 the CDF published *Dominus Iesus*, which referred to all non-Roman Catholic Churches as 'ecclesial communities', rather than churches.¹⁸ The document restated the uniqueness ('unicity' was the term used) of the Roman Catholic Church. It stated that 'the unicity of the Church founded by him [Christ] must be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith. Just as there is one Christ, so there exists a single body of Christ, a single Bride of Christ: "a single Catholic and apostolic Church"'. It defended the necessity of its clear presentation of Catholic doctrinal truths.

The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle) the mystery of Jesus Christ and the

16 <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/dialoghi-multilaterali/dialogo/commissione-fede-e-costituzione/risposta-cattolica-a-bem/en.html>.

17 *A Catholic Response to BEM*, p. 138.

18 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.

Church lose their character of absolute truth and salvific universality ... the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense.¹⁹

One study of this document correctly states that 'the teaching contained within *Dominus Iesus* is neither innovatory nor radical; it is rather a narrow, guarded and defensive interpretation of Second Vatican Council statements and post-Vatican II Church documents ... Once again, we can perceive the tensions and contradictions inherent in statements issued by the CDF in *Dominus Iesus*. The hermeneutic at play is a hermeneutic of faith as opposed to one of suspicion ... (it) relies on a propositional interpretation of scripture ... (and defends) the veracity of the Catholic Church in her unique, authoritative and sacramental manifestation as the inheritor and guardian of a tradition handed down to her via Christ and the Apostles particularly Peter.'²⁰

Even the much-welcomed encyclical of John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, of 1995, which restated the Catholic Church's commitment to ecumenism, also said 'To uphold a vision of unity which takes account of all the demands of revealed truth does not mean to put a brake on the ecumenical movement. On the contrary, it means preventing it from settling for apparent solutions which would lead to no firm and solid results. The obligation to respect the truth is absolute.'²¹ This statement was about absolute respect, and not absolute truth, but the implication was that truth should also be described in this way. There was however also some acceptance of legitimate diversity and 'complementary' doctrinal formulations.²² It was clear that there was an unresolved tension here: a commitment to absolute truth in doctrinal and moral matters sat with difficulty with some acceptance of legitimate diversity.

Moral Absolutes in Life in Christ and Veritatis Splendor

The deeply traditional attitude of the Vatican at this time was further shown in the 1993 publication of *Veritatis Splendor*, which eclipsed the publication

¹⁹ *Dominus Iesus*, paras 4, and 17.

²⁰ Philip McGee, *An analysis of the major tensions inherent in the Catholic Church's response to the religious other: From Vatican II and Nostra Aetate to Dominus Iesus*, University of Glasgow, M.Th. Diss., 2012, pp. 102, 104, 108.

²¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html. *Ut Unum Sint*, para. 79.

²² *Ut Unum Sint*, para. 57. William Henn, O.F.M., 'Ut Unum Sint and Catholic Involvement in Ecumenism', *The Ecumenical Review* 52.2 (2009).

in the same year of the ARCIC text *Life in Christ*. This intervention hindered Anglican – Roman Catholic dialogue, and many conservative Roman Catholic theologians (Germain Grisez, Romanus Cessario, O.P., and Servais Pinckaers, O.P.) defended the view of moral absolutes put forward in *Veritatis Splendor*.²³

Life in Christ had taken a moderate view on the nature of moral absolutes:

For example, a notable feature of established Roman Catholic moral teaching is its emphasis on the absoluteness of some demands of the moral law and the existence of certain prohibitions to which there are no exceptions. In these instances, what is prohibited is intrinsically disordered and therefore objectively wrong. Anglicans, on the other hand, while acknowledging the same ultimate values, are not persuaded that the laws as we apprehend them are necessarily absolute.²⁴

This statement of the Anglican approach was not in itself controversial. Conservatives in the Vatican could it as a statement of why Anglicans were indeed not part of the moral tradition of Roman Catholicism. However, the same paragraph of *Life in Christ* went on:

In both our Communion, however, there are now signs of a shift away from a reliance on the concept of law as the central category for providing moral teaching. Its place is being taken by the concept of persons-in-community. An ethic of response is preferred to an ethic of obedience. In the desire to respond as fully as possible to the new law of Christ, the primacy of persons is emphasized above the impersonalism of a system of law, thus avoiding the distortions of both individualism and utilitarianism. The full significance of this shift of emphasis is not yet clear, and its detailed implications have still to be worked out.

In terms of specific areas of Christian morals, *Life in Christ* again reflected the division between Roman Catholics and Anglicans in a careful manner. On marriage, it wrote:

Roman Catholics go on to affirm that the unbreakable bond between Christ and his Church, signified in the union of two baptized persons, in

23 J. A. DiNoia, O. P., and Romanus Cessario, O. P. (eds), *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers, 1999) contains articles praising it by Pinckaers, Alasdair MacIntyre, Russell Hittinger and Cessario.

24 *Life in Christ*, para. 52.

its turn strengthens the marriage bond between husband and wife and renders it absolutely unbreakable, except by death. Other marriages can, in exceptional circumstances, be dissolved ... Some Anglicans hold that all marriages are therefore indissoluble. Others, while holding that all marriages are indeed sacramental and are in principle indissoluble, are not persuaded that the marriage bond, even in the case of marriage of the baptized, can never in fact be dissolved.²⁵

On abortion, the argument was similar.

For Roman Catholics, the rejection of abortion is an example of an absolute prohibition. For Anglicans, however, such an absolute and categorical prohibition would not be typical of their moral reasoning. That is why it is important to set such differences in context. Only then shall we be able to assess their wider implications.²⁶

The official Roman Catholic response, in the form of the official commentary, to *Life in Christ* is a complex one to analyse. The commentary by the PCPCU was appreciative. It was written by an American Jesuit, Thomas Kopfensteiner, who later worked in health care ethics. The commentary spoke of the new era beyond the moral theology manuals that existed before Vatican II. 'Ecumenical dialogue is one area where the creative and reconciling character of moral reasoning will be evident.' Furthermore, on contraception, the commentary mentions other aspects than 'the procreative capacity.' It mentions 'a personalist revisioning of sexuality. Sex has the power to communicate and enhance the intimacy of the couple.' Overall, the commentary looked forward to further discussions which would open 'avenues of reconciliation'.²⁷

The tenor of the PCPCU's commentary was not at all acceptable to those in the Vatican who were already deeply concerned about the influence of a group of Roman Catholic theologians, especially in moral theology, who took a much more open view of the possibility of ecumenical dialogue. They were known as the proportionalists (among them Josef Fuchs, S. J., at the Gregorian University in Rome, Alfons Auer in Tübingen, and Richard McCormick, S. J., in the United States).²⁸ What was interesting was not simply that they opposed the CDF.

²⁵ *Life in Christ*, para. 74.

²⁶ *Life in Christ* para. 86.

²⁷ Thomas R Kopfensteiner, S. J., *Official Commentary on Life in Christ*, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1994.

²⁸ Josef Fuchs, S.J., *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1983). Chapter 7 is on Moral Absolutes. James Keenan, S.J., A

They also worked globally, teaching in Rome, Tübingen, and Washington, D.C., seeking a new Roman Catholic ethics after Vatican II, which could respond to the questions of a global and increasingly secular culture. Another moral theologian who was very open to ecumenical dialogue was the pre-eminent theologian Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R., who taught at the Alphonsianum in Rome, though he was not usually considered to be one of the proportionalists.

The main objection of the CDF was that this group espoused moral relativism. This was unfair and was a caricature of their position. They were often dismissed as 'liberals'. However, it certainly was the case that many of these theologians preferred a personal ethic to one of law. Brian Johnstone, an Australian Redemptorist, was the main Roman Catholic moral theologian on the ARCIC group which had written *Life in Christ*. The references in *Life in Christ* to 'the primacy of persons' would have reflected his influence.

Veritatis Splendor was published a month before *Life in Christ*. This encyclical was deeply critical of those theologians who subscribed to proportionism, and they ceased as a result of this document to have any influence at the official level. It began in the opening paragraph: 'In the depths of his [the theologian's] heart there always remains a yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it.'²⁹ The encyclical condemned explicitly theologians who questioned the Church's teaching.³⁰ Later the encyclical spoke of 'the absolute validity of negative moral precepts, which oblige without exception The faithful are obliged to acknowledge and respect the specific moral precepts declared and taught by the Church in the name of God, the Creator and Lord.'³¹

The encyclical recognised that not all would agree with it. 'The Church's teaching, and in particular her firmness in defending the universal and permanent validity of the precepts prohibiting intrinsically evil acts, is not infrequently seen as the sign of an intolerable intransigence ... The Church, one

History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 142–145 on these theologians. James Keenan, 'Champion of Conscience', *America* April 4, 2005, is a tribute to Fuchs by Keenan, who was his doctoral student, written just after Fuchs' death aged 90. Aline Kalbian, 'Where have all the proportionalists gone?', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30.1 (2002).

29 *Veritatis Splendor*, 1993, para. 1. Brian Johnstone, 'The Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*', *The Ecumenical Review* 48.2 (April 1996), pp. 164 and 170: 'The encyclical presents a severe critique of our contemporary culture ... These statements may resurrect an intense and often bitter debate.'

30 *Veritatis Splendor*, para. 65.

31 *Veritatis Splendor*, para. 6.

hears, is lacking in understanding and compassion.’³² This fact does not dismay the writers of the encyclical. In a robust defence, those who argue for a greater liberalism in moral theology are strongly criticized: ‘An attitude of this sort corrupts the morality of society as a whole, since it encourages doubt about the objectivity of the moral law in general and a rejection of the absoluteness of moral prohibitions regarding specific human acts, and it ends up by confusing all judgments about values.’³³ The encyclical went on to argue that there are intrinsically evil acts: ‘Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature “incapable of being ordered” to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church’s moral tradition, have been termed “intrinsically evil” [*intrinsece malum*]: they are such always and per se.’³⁴

The Anglican – Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States (ARCUSA) summarized the difference between the two documents as follows. It is worth quoting the document at length, because it expresses succinctly the chasm which had opened up in moral theology:

Veritatis Splendor bases its moral vision primarily on the concept of divine law, rather than the relationship-responsibility concept which governs *Life in Christ*. By contrast with ARCIC’s acceptance of a degree of ethical diversity as compatible with healthy ecclesial communion, it is a major objective of the papal encyclical to reprove the growth of such diversity among Roman Catholics as inimical to authentic communion (VS, NO. 113).

Other points of contrast are more formidable, however. As indicated above, the two documents appear to take incompatible positions concerning the impact of ethical diversity on ecclesial communion and concerning the appropriate role of ecclesiastical authority in dealing with such diversity. More specifically, ARCIC’s suggestion that differing Anglican and Roman Catholic views on ‘absolute moral prohibitions’ are not of central importance seems hardly reconcilable with the major concern of *Veritatis Splendor* – reiterated, in part, in the subsequent encyclical *Evangelium Vitæ* (25 MARCH 1995).³⁵

32 *Veritatis Splendor*, para. 95.

33 *Veritatis Splendor*, paras 104–105.

34 *Veritatis Splendor* para. 80.

35 <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/ecumenical/anglican/ethics-in-ecumenical-dialogue.cfm>.

There was a huge debate following the publication of *Veritatis Splendor*.³⁶ It became a test case for conservative moral theologians in the Roman Catholic Church, but it also sparked an intense discussion inside Anglicanism. The questions of moral absolutes and intrinsic evil became central to the reason for not progressing the Anglican – Roman Catholic dialogue further on matters of moral theology. Many Anglican church leaders and theologians (notably Archbishop John Habgood, Peter Baelz and David Brown) had grave doubts about this emphasis on moral absolutes, and were concerned about the possibility of any further dialogue on moral issues,³⁷ as did some Roman Catholic theologians (notably Bernard Häring and Herbert McCabe, O.P.).³⁸ The leading English, Anglican ethicist, Oliver O'Donovan, welcomed the document, while having some reservations.³⁹ He was also critical of *Life in Christ*, despite having been a consultant to it, describing it as 'diffuse ... rambling ... disappointing'.⁴⁰

The effect of this crux on ecumenical dialogue in moral theology was dramatic; it curtailed it altogether. It is unclear whether the CDF thought that this was a price worth paying, but it seems that way. For much of the period 2000–2010 the only ecumenical dialogue through ARCIC was on the doctrine of the Virgin Mary and her place in salvation, which resulted in the 2007 document, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*.⁴¹ This document received a very mixed reaction within Anglicanism, welcomed by some, but fiercely criticized by others.⁴² There was no dialogue either on ecclesiology or in moral theology. Nothing would happen in these areas until after 2011 when ARCIC began its work again in the form of ARCIC III. At the same time the World Council of Churches took another major initiative.

36 *Studies in Christian Ethics* 7.2 (1994) contains short pieces on the encyclical. Other surveys of moral theology give it a prominent place. Charles Curran, *Diverse Voices in Modern U.S. Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018); Michael E Allsopp and John J O'Keefe (eds), *Veritatis Splendor- American Responses* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1995).

37 Charles Yeats (ed.), *Veritatis Splendor- A Response* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1994).

38 John Wilkins (ed.), *Understanding Veritatis Splendor* (London: SPCK, 1994). These articles first appeared in *The Tablet*.

39 Oliver O'Donovan, 'A Summons to reality', in *Understanding Veritatis Splendor*, p. 41.

40 Oliver O'Donovan, 'Life in Christ', *The Tablet*, 2 July 1994. My thanks to *The Tablet* for making the article available.

41 <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-ii/en.html>.

42 *Essays by the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England: Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (ARCIC II) G.S. Misc. 872 (London: Archbishops' Council, 2008).

The Significance of the Church: Towards a Common Vision

Following the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982, the World Council of Churches spent the next three decades working on another convergence text, *The Church: Towards A Common Vision* (henceforth abbreviated to *TCV*) which was released in 2013.⁴³ The response by the PCPCU in 2019 to this second text was also positive, but this time it was not side-lined by the CDF. This response signalled a change in Roman Catholic ecumenical relations. Instead of there being one response by the PCPCU, which was positive about ecumenical change, while the CDF maintained a much more traditional line, the whole character of Roman Catholic ecclesiology began to be different at the official level.⁴⁴

The Roman Catholic response referred to the principles of Receptive Ecumenism, and the real possibility of differentiated consensus on ecclesiology. Remarkably it said that 'it has been an unfortunate feature of Catholic theology' that the expression 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' had been used in an exclusive sense as if pertaining only to the Catholic Church. It noted that *Dominus Iesus* 'was received with some tension' and sought to put a positive face on this document of the CDF. It also explicitly admitted the tension between preserving the deposit of faith and the need to acknowledge change. The way that identity was maintained in the midst of change is by the *sensus fidelium*, the work of theologians and 'the decisive voice of the successors of the Apostles'. Here there was a role for the laity in preserving ecclesial identity. 'Catholics are not afraid of change.'⁴⁵ The change of tone is remarkable compared with many of the statements of the CDF. While the PCPCU had always been open to difference, change and some pluralism in the expression of doctrine, liturgy and morals, this could not be said of most of the statements of the CDF in the period 1980–2010.

Why does this new WCC text matter so much? It is because it begins to explore the possibility of plurality, diversity and provisionality, without adopting a relativist or non-cognitivist standpoint. *TCV* asserts that 'legitimate diversity in the life of communion is a gift from the Lord'.⁴⁶ It cites I Corinthians 12, Acts 2 and 4, and of course Acts 15. *TCV*'s overall emphasis throughout the

43 <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>.

44 <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/notizie-2019/2019-10-23-tctcv-catholic-response.html>.

45 *Catholic Response to TCTCV*, p. 25.

46 *The Church*, paras. 28 and following.

text is markedly both pneumatological and missionary. The Holy Spirit (see paragraph 33) is the principal agent in establishing the kingdom of God and 'guiding the Church', and it is affirmed that 'the eschatological people of God is built up by the Holy Spirit through a diversity of gifts or ministries'.⁴⁷ The attention given to the role of the Holy Spirit means that *TCV* can also speak of the 'living tradition' of the Church, taking up paragraphs 8 and 12 of *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁸ It is interesting that the Church of Scotland response to *TCV* speaks of unease and of its struggle with regard to the term 'legitimate diversity'.⁴⁹ So, *TCV* can affirm a much looser cohesion that was traditional, with the main emphasis being on mission, evangelism and cultural diversity. In all of this the work of the Holy Spirit is central.

Yet it was not only the WCC text which mattered. There was also the Lutheran – Roman Catholic dialogue. This can be analysed in two parts. First, there was the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed in 1999 by the PCPCU and the Lutheran World Federation.⁵⁰ While historic in laying to rest an old quarrel from the Reformation era, it did not touch on questions of authority or ecclesiology. It is important not to overstress this development. Whatever may be said in regional, ecumenical dialogue, Cardinal Koch, the President of the PCPCU, rejected the Protestant desire for an 'ecumenism of difference'.⁵¹ Nevertheless, in spite of the caution in Rome, those engaged in the regional dialogues continued to explore possibilities of change. One of the main participants in the United States Lutheran – Roman Catholic dialogue was a Roman Catholic sister, Professor Susan Wood, S.C.L.⁵² Wood has written perceptively of the strengths and limitations of the idea of 'differentiated consensus', following the work of the nineteenth-century Roman Catholic ecclesiologist Johann Adam Möhler.⁵³ Again the commitment to doctrinal absolutes began to shift. Wood writes: 'Catholics have too frequently evaluated the Lutheran teaching of *simul iustus et peccator* against a metaphysical ontology which judges that one cannot occupy two conflicting states of being

47 *The Church*, paras 33 and 52.

48 *The Church*, paras 11 and 38.

49 *The Church of Scotland response to The Church: Towards A Common Vision*, para. 4.

50 The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/hrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

51 *Prolusio* of the Cardinal President, 'The Unity of Christians: What Model of Full Communion?', *Information Service* 148 (2016), pp. 36–47, at p. 44.

52 Susan Wood, S.C.L., *One Baptism: Ecumenical Dimensions of the Doctrine of Baptism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Michael Glazier, 2009).

53 Susan Wood, S.C.L., 'The Shifting Ecumenical Landscape at the 2017 Reformation Centenary', *Theological Studies*, 78.3 (2017), p. 583.

simultaneously ... Although no tradition is asked to surrender its core beliefs, each must remain open to examining those beliefs in the light of new relationships, new contexts, and new historical and theological insights.⁵⁴ This was indeed a major shift in the presentation of a Roman Catholic position.

The ARCIC Text *Walking Together on the Way*

The resumption of ARCIC in 2011, with a mandate to look specifically at ecclesiology and moral discernment, moved therefore into a highly contentious area. It was followed two years later by the election of Pope Francis. While not going back to the theology of the proportionalists, an emphasis on moral discernment has become central to Francis' teaching. There are two changes which are highly significant in current Roman Catholic moral theology. The first is a strong emphasis on a pastoral approach, notwithstanding the possibility of breaches of a moral prohibition based on a moral absolute. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* in 2016 was on marriage.⁵⁵ Its sections on conscience and the role of the Holy Spirit replace the older emphasis on absolutes in papal encyclicals. *Amoris Laetitia* speaks of 'the formation of conscience', which is 'the most secret core and sanctuary of a person'.⁵⁶ Further, it argues that 'individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church's praxis'.⁵⁷ It also notes that 'We [pastors] have been called to form consciences, not reclaim them'.⁵⁸ Finally, and most strikingly, it says:

Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal.⁵⁹

54 Wood, 'The Shifting', p. 585.

55 https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

56 *Amoris*, para. 222.

57 *Amoris*, para. 303.

58 *Amoris*, para. 37.

59 *Amoris*, para. 303. See also Conor Kelly, 'The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*', *Theological Studies* 77.4 (2016), pp. 922–948.

The second significant change within Roman Catholic moral theology is a growing awareness of historicism, which is carefully distinguished from moral relativism. There are still moral absolutes, and objective norms, but they are apprehended within our history. The growth of historical consciousness among many moral theologians has also been strong, and this makes surveying the defence of moral absolutism in Roman Catholic moral theology a complex matter. Some moral theologians no longer argue in this way. Others bide their time, waiting for a return to the certainties of the period from 1980–2000, occasionally strongly criticizing both *Amoris Laetitia* and Pope Francis.⁶⁰ However, there is certainly a change of mood, or of theological tone, as is shown clearly by the report of the Roman Catholic International Theological Commission in 2009 on natural law, which is marked by its strong acceptance of historicity. It spoke of ‘a more profound understanding of the relationships between the moral subject, nature and God, as well as a better consideration of the historicity that affects the concrete applications of the natural law.’⁶¹

The greatest change, however, occurs in the first text produced by ARCIC III in 2018 in Erfurt, Germany. Entitled *Walking Together on the Way*, it was influenced by *TCV* and the methodology of Receptive Ecumenism which had been developed by the lay, English, Roman Catholic theologian, Paul Murray at Durham University, a member of the Commission, and was officially adopted as the methodology of ARCIC III. This ecumenical method takes for granted that maintaining the internal coherence or denominational identity of a church should not be its primary objective, although of course the renewal of the tradition is the aim and aspiration of this method. The approach of Receptive Ecumenism is described in *Walking Together*, as follows:

This process involves being prepared both to discern what appears to be overlooked or underdeveloped in one’s own tradition and to ask whether such things are better developed in the other tradition. It then requires the openness to ask how such perceived strengths in the other tradi-

60 Mariusz Biliniewicz, *Amoris Laetitia and the Spirit of Vatican II: The Sources of Controversy* (London: Routledge, 2018). David Elliott, ‘Irregular Unions and Moral Growth in *Amoris Laetitia*’, *Journal of Moral Theology* 8.2, Special Issue (2019), p.31: ‘the more innovative parts of the document gave rise to a very public and ill-tempered debate at all levels of the Church’. For the most articulate theological criticism, from two of the leading conservative theologians of the period 1980–2010, see John Finnis and Germain Grisez, ‘An Open Letter to Pope Francis’, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusive/2016/12/an-open-letter-to-pope-francis>.

61 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html, paras 10, 53–54.

tion might be able, through receptive learning, to help with the development and enrichment of this aspect of ecclesial life within one's own tradition.⁶²

Walking Together also points to the rich diversity of communion, speaking of 'the Church more truly catholic, more truly universal in space and in time', which both Communion must learn together.⁶³ Here is a striking goal. The task of ecumenism is to learn about our rich diversity, and that can only be done together. This is very different from the ecclesial tone of past decades. The document also follows *TCV* in referring to the work of the Holy Spirit in creating diversity in the early church. It cites Acts 15, and Galatians 2, where encountering diversity also caused conflict. The diversity of the faith, however, fits the growing diversity of culture which the gospel addresses, while being held together by a common faith.⁶⁴

Clearly the issue is how this diversity is to be both celebrated and yet kept in check. Receptive ecumenism precisely addresses the exchange of gifts which a recognition of difference calls for. However, *Walking Together* says that authority is needed to maintain 'both diversity and unanimity'.⁶⁵ This challenge calls for discernment and consultation. The role of the bishop had come into being in the post apostolic age. So, the report says that legitimate diversity and unity are served by instruments of catholicity.⁶⁶ This idea sets the agenda for the future. The issue is how one discerns the limits of diversity. *Walking Together* is aware of this. It lays down a challenge. 'Anglicans are concerned to ensure that the provinces remain doctrinally cohesive despite great diversity of ecclesial life.'⁶⁷ What are the limits of theological diversity, especially in ethical matters such as sexuality, in a culturally ever less homogeneous world? Furthermore, how can the instruments of authority become more consensual, in both communions?

The official Vatican commentary on the text was remarkable in the warmth of its welcome.⁶⁸ This is an unprecedented change. It says of the text that there is an 'emphasis on fraternal care', and that 'there is a tone of mutual gratitude

62 *Walking Together*, para. 18.

63 *Walking Together*, para. 9.

64 *Walking Together*, para. 33.

65 *Walking Together*, para. 41.

66 *Walking Together*, paras 56–57.

67 *Walking Together*, para. 125.

68 <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-iii/arcic-iii---documents/2018-walking-together-on-the-way---commentary.html>.

that characterizes the whole document'.⁶⁹ Indeed, the Roman Catholic commentary asks for even more emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit at all levels of the Church, citing the way that Pope Francis had appealed to the work of the Spirit in his homilies.⁷⁰ The commentary also welcomes the emphasis on diversity, regional synodality, and dialogue. Again, it is frank about the failure to progress dialogue within the Catholic Church after Vatican II. 'The matter of dialogue within the Church, in the way the [Second Vatican] Council is here envisioning, is far from being realized.'⁷¹ Above all, and starkly in contrast with earlier statements of the CDF, the commentary accepts and welcomes the need for much greater provisionality and humility 'in matters of teaching and governance.' Again, Pope Francis is appealed to. The official commentary refers especially to *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis writes: 'The Lord himself, during his earthly life, often warned his disciples that there were things they could not yet understand and that they would have to await the Holy Spirit'⁷²

The Future of Ecumenical Dialogue

In a recent collection of essays on the work of the distinguished Roman Catholic moral theologian Servais Pinckaers, Matthew Levering wrote that 'thanks to the 1968 promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* and amplified by the presentations of conscience found in *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), the doctrine of conscience has become a nodal point of conflict among Catholic moral theologians.'⁷³ Pinckaers was rumoured (there is no proof) to be the principal drafter of *Veritatis Splendor*. What is interesting is that twenty-five years after the publication of the encyclical, Roman Catholic moral theology no longer sees itself as being riven by debates about moral absolutes. The decision by Pope Francis not to reconfirm Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller for a second five-year term as prefect of the CDF in 2017 was also significant. Müller had been preparing for many years an *Opera Omnia* of Pope Benedict's writings, and he was clear that '*Amoris Laetitia* must be interpreted in the light of the whole doctrine of the Church.'⁷⁴ Speculation

69 Catholic Commentary, p. 6.

70 Catholic Commentary, p. 19.

71 Catholic Commentary, p. 23.

72 Catholic Commentary, p. 25, citing Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 225.

73 Matthew Levering, 'Pinckaers and Häring on Conscience', *Journal of Moral Theology* 8.2, Special Issue (2019), pp. 134–165.

74 *Catholic Herald*, 1 February 2017.

on Vatican politics is not the remit of this article, but his departure showed that the CDF no longer had the authority which it once had.

Anglican moral theology is now quite diverse, ranging from feminism to conservative evangelicalism, as is shown by recent intense discussions on sexuality across the Anglican Communion. There are now many tensions within Anglicanism, especially between evangelicals and those seeking further changes in moral teaching. The second phase of ARCIC III's mandate will examine the discernment of 'right ethical teaching'. *Lumen Gentium* spoke of both receiving and adhering to a given deposit of faith but also of penetrating it more deeply. 'The people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life.'⁷⁵ Can this be applied in the present ARCIC dialogue in moral theology? *Walking Together* argues for a living catholicity in and through diversity.⁷⁶ It is clear that each tradition now has both tensions within it and also between itself and the other tradition, as the Receptive Ecumenism project has pointed out. When one examines contraception, the death penalty, divorce and remarriage, euthanasia, sexuality and sexual abuse (the list is long), each tradition needs to listen to the other, and to ask each other for assistance. The days of adhering to a rigid defence of moral absolutism have now passed in the Roman Catholic Church. It is by no means clear what the future will hold, but the need for further dialogue (using such fruitful methods as Receptive Ecumenism) is crucial. While the change from the 1980s is very considerable, ecumenical dialogue in moral theology is now at a critical, and very uncertain, moment in ARCIC.

⁷⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, para. 12.

⁷⁶ *Walking Together*, paras 56–57.