

## **The Care of the Churches**

### **Sermons on the Subjects of the Day (2)**

The second in a monthly Fulcrum series [hyperlink into series page] of seven sermons for the web by Oliver O'Donovan

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*"And apart from other things there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28).*

*The notes in the text are hyperlinked into the end notes; to return to the text, click on the end note number*

At the still centre of the storm in the Anglican Communion stands the isolated, scholarly figure of the current Archbishop of Canterbury - the first holder of that office since the Reformation, it is worth recalling, to have come to it directly from outside the Church of England, and probably the only one to have received his appointment by something close to acclamation. It is necessary to recall the circumstances.

In 2001, on the verge of the British-American invasion of Iraq, the British Prime Minister must surely have had some qualms about placing in the seat of highest spiritual authority in England a figure known both for anti-war and disestablishment sympathies. (His theological credentials as a critic of liberalism were, perhaps, less in the Prime Minister's mind.) Popular demand in England for the appointment of the reluctant Archbishop of Wales was, however, widespread, and embraced all the traditional party emphases. This harmony was disturbed at the last minute by a vigorous press-campaign in his favour in the pro-gay interest, signalling an expectation in some quarters that he would promote a change of attitude on the subject; this produced a panicky reaction of hostility from some evangelicals. But most, even of these, knew well enough that the press portrait of the "radical" Archbishop revealed only a fraction of the sympathies of a complex mind, and reckoned that he would make it his first business at Canterbury to seek a common judgment and pursue a common policy. The lengthy personal statement of June 27<sup>th</sup> 2006 confirms what was evident from the beginning, that the Archbishop's own comportment in relation to the crisis is indissolubly identified with the conciliar policy of Windsor and Dromantine. And that is not the least cause of his present isolation, for conciliarity has been his practice and not merely his theory, at a time when many wanted high-profile personal gestures. Such gestures used not to lie outside his repertoire: his

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appointment to the Lady Margaret Professorship at Oxford was greeted by John Macquarrie, his predecessor, with the unforgettable words, "He'll do fine – if he's out of jail at the time!" But they do lie outside his very Anglican understanding of church authority. "The idea of an Archbishop of Canterbury resolving any of this by decree," he writes, "is misplaced, however tempting for many. The Archbishop of Canterbury presides and convenes in the Communion, and may...outline the theological framework in which a problem should be addressed; but he must always act collegially, with the bishops of his own local Church and with the primates and other instruments of communion."<sup>i</sup>

The Anglican Communion was not the first major family of churches to be caught up in the throes of a divisive moral disagreement; the Roman Catholic church after *Humanae Vitae* found itself in just such a state of disarray. In that case, however, the ecclesiological tools needed to confront the disagreement lay to hand; for the Anglicans they did not. The most important feature of the Windsor Report was an attempt to forge them. The serendipitous character of Windsor's achievement was to combine the somewhat ill-defined commitment of the 1998 Lambeth Conference to an ongoing study listening to homosexual Christians' experience with a project for which the churches of the Southern hemisphere were eager, "mending the nets", *ie* constitutional reform of the Communion's institutions that would undoubtedly have the effect of weakening Northern, and especially US influence. A surprising amount of Windsor's attention was given to longer-term prescriptions for what it called the "instruments of unity", *ie* the primacy of Canterbury, the Primates' Meeting, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lambeth Conference, including the proposal of a common canon-law framework to define their roles. This caused some dismay among Northern-hemisphere Anglicans, which might have shipwrecked the proposals from the outset; but it also tended to win the confidence of the churches of the South, more likely to be suspicious or lassitudinous about the listening-process.

Windsor looked to find a point of reference in ecclesiology, borrowing aspects of the "communion ecclesiology" elaborated in a variety of ecumenical circles, not least in Anglican-Roman Catholic discussion. The irony of this should not pass without notice. The historic stress-lines of the Anglican self-consciousness were ecclesiological; yet at the beginning of the twenty first century the one point offering some hope of purchase on an intractable disagreement was a doctrine of the church as communion worked out in conversations with ecumenical partners. Almost everything else that might have served as a point of reference was in contention: the ethical aprioris to which liberalism

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habitually appealed, the authority and hermeneutic of Scripture, to which evangelicals appealed. More than an irony, it was in its way a triumph: a triumph for the ecumenical movement from an unlikely source, and even, since the ecumenical movement itself owed much of its early impetus to liberal anti-dogmatism, a triumph for the hegemony of the century just closed. Yet anti-dogmatism alone could not have produced communion-ecclesiology, and at the close of the twentieth century liberal Christianity, increasingly suspicious of the doctrinal content of ecumenical progress, by no means looked upon the ecumenical movement as its favourite child. Another case of Newman's "miscarrying womb", perhaps?<sup>ii</sup>

For one church to wish it of another "that you may have communion with us" is framed by a daring and demanding conviction: "our communion is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). No communion can possibly be claimed within the church of Christ on other than these Gospel terms. But to claim evangelical communion is a statement of faith in God's gift of himself, a gift that cannot be proved empirically, but must be believed in and witnessed to. In the divided state of the Christian churches no witness to it will be perfect. Yet it is not un-witnessed to, either. Ecumenical encounters between the churches witness to it; so do attempts to make existing institutions and structures more serviceable within the churches. What makes a structure serviceable? It is serviceable when it secures communion within the church on its Gospel basis; for "one holy, catholic and apostolic church" cannot live apart from "one faith" and "one baptism". In order to do this, structures must be equipped to exercise judgment, to draw a line, where necessary, between true and false communion. To have structures capable of doing that is to enjoy an *institutional* communion that witnesses to, and safeguards, evangelical communion.

Evangelical communion is never merely synchronic; it is always also diachronic, involving a communion with past Christians in receiving from them the faith they have witnessed to and handing that faith on again to further generations. This is what is meant when we speak of the need to preserve "tradition". Traditional communion does not imply that there can be no radical correction of the tradition as received, such as was undertaken in the Reformation. Tradition is founded upon the authority of the prophets' and apostles' testimony to Christ, and so has a principle of self-correction built into it with the authority of Scripture. It does imply, however, that when there is a question about authentic terms of communion, tradition has a significant role in helping us answer it. Anglicans have understood the authority of tradition as running much wider and deeper than what has been thought and done by Anglicans. They have aimed to interpret and

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regulate Anglican practices in the light of an ecumenical tradition running back to the apostolic age.

Only in this wider context can the role of the instruments of unity within the Communion be understood. The significance of the See of Canterbury, in particular, lies in its service to the tradition of Christian faith and practice. The Archbishop has authority; but, like all authority, his is subject to the authority of God the Holy Spirit speaking to and through the churches in the process of faithful receiving and transmission of tradition. It is not invested with discretion to abolish existing terms of communion and replace them with others. And what the Archbishop cannot do, neither can others by using communion with his office as a kind of wrench to split the church apart from its historic practices. "Communion with the See of Canterbury" is an institutional function in the service of communion among Anglicans, and, through them, in the service of the communion of the *una sancta catholica ecclesia*. A claim that someone is in communion with Canterbury is not valid merely by being asserted, nor even by the acceptance of the Archbishop of the day. Such a claim must be open to evaluation, submitted to the theological test of whether the Anglican tradition of Christian faith and practice has in fact been sustained and renewed by the communion that is claimed. Just as Christians are not *admitted* as Christians by other Christians, only *recognised* as Christians on the basis of the Holy Spirit's work in them, so it is with Anglicans – for being an Anglican is simply a specific modulation of being a Christian. The heart of the Archbishop's role in the Communion is to give voice and effect to judgments the churches have reached about the work of the Spirit in their midst, to speak and act on behalf of their common mutual recognition. This is complicated by his special role within the Church of England, for the Anglican Communion is constructed on the historic relationship of its member-churches to the English mother-church, which is why its senior primacy is vested in the Primate of All England. But that does not give the Church of England a deciding voice in defining the Communion's direction. The historic relation between the English church and the Communion is entrusted to the harmonious way the Archbishop exercises his authority in the two concentric spheres.

One way of describing the focus of the Windsor Commission is to say that it was asked to render a service to the exercise of *episkopê* within the Anglican churches, not a service of *didachê*, the teaching of the word. Its more immediate prescriptions, then, were aimed at achieving the minimum steps backward necessary to get a conciliar process on the road, a process *within which* the *didachê* of the church could be examined, refined and strengthened. Minimum steps, however, did not mean "minor steps", especially in the

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case of the North American churches, which were asked to accept responsibility and express regret for initiating the disruption, “breaching the proper constraints of the bonds of affection” as it was portentously expressed, in the consecration of the New Hampshire bishop. The non-American bishops, on the other hand, who had intervened in the North American churches in reaction, were to express regret for the unfortunate *consequences* of their response to the challenge. To the proposals of the Windsor Report the Primates gave flesh in their Dromantine meeting in 2005. The heart of the action they took there was not their decision to request that ECUSA and the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) voluntarily withdraw from the bodies of the Communion “up to the next Lambeth Conference”. That was only intelligible when set beside the preceding resolution: “In order for the recommendations of the Windsor Report to be properly addressed, time needs to be given to (ECUSA and ACC) for consideration...according to their constitutional processes”.<sup>iii</sup> In other words the Primates intended to begin the conciliar process in the churches that had made it necessary, allowing these churches to be heard to speak as a whole - lay, clerical and episcopal – apart from the decisions of their leaders. It was a daring strategy, which may yet turn out (depending how the ambiguous resolutions of the ECUSA General Convention finally appear on consideration) to have led nowhere. But it opened the way to those North American Anglicans who believed the measures taken were right in principle to re-evaluate the policy of “never explain, never apologise”, and it opened the door to those who believed the new steps misconceived to turn from impotent protest to serious synodical argument.

Shrewd observers have remarked that the Primates’ response transformed a polarised situation, revisionist against anti-revisionist, into a quadrant of views, where conciliarists of different judgments over the moral issue have to come to terms with anti-conciliar revisionists and anti-conciliar anti-revisionists. The emergence of a strong conciliar front, more or less the official position of the Communion and most of its constituent churches, was what the process was supposed to achieve. An anti-conciliar revisionist resistance loyal to the North American initiatives was only to be expected. But the emergence of an anti-revisionist strand of opinion that is cool, to say the least, about the conciliar process is, perhaps, more perplexing. With the North Americans on the back foot, it might have seemed that anti-revisionist sentiment only had to sit tight to the conciliar project. How is this development to be accounted for?

By a conjunction of two factors: the first was a confidence in the *immediacy of moral judgments*, such as underlay, also, the development of liberal Christianity. Where there seems to be nothing to discuss, there can be no discussion. But “in the beginning is the

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half-light," as one philosopher says about the foundations of ethics.<sup>iv</sup> A process of moral reasoning is needed if we are to reach well-founded concrete moral judgments. By its very logic moral intuitionism will be indifferently radical or conservative; once the moment of moral insight is detached from the discursive project of reflection and deliberation, it can rebound off the wall at any angle whatever. The intuitionist appeal to a "discernment" on the revisionist side called forth an equal and opposite move – all the more so since an anti-revisionist "discernment" could claim, with much greater *prima facie* plausibility, to be in line with the unwavering testimony of Scripture. To some reflections on how Scripture is to be approached in this discussion we must return later. It is enough to remark in passing that, on this side as on that, the immediacy of the insight tends to make the *interpretation* of Scripture seem superfluous. The contrast with the rather careful hermeneutic of Scriptural teaching on divorce and remarriage is striking; and to this interesting, if teasing analogy, too, we must return.

But there was a second cause that reinforced the intuition-Scripture conjunction. That was an interest in communion-structures, the "mending the nets" agenda which had reacted in wrath to the challenge to the authority of the Lambeth Conference. This quite separate cause of offence went back to the unhappy inconclusiveness of the 1988 Conference's reflections on the consecration of women bishops, when churches supportive of that initiative made it plain that the authority of the Conference was not, in their view, sufficient to prevent it. This was a new theme in the Anglican fugue, and one with serious implications just at the point when bishops from the developing world had achieved a majority in the Conference. In the post-colonial era racism is necessarily a sensitive issue. The innovating churches not only failed to appreciate the wider resonances of their tough-minded pitch of 1988; some of them came back in 1998 apparently resolved to repeat the offence. Those who claim special powers of moral discernment can hardly afford such moments of massive insensitivity, to which much of the bitterness of the controversy is attributable. Certainly, it accounts for strands of opinion that have wanted to ram the Lambeth Conference Resolution forcefully down the revisionists' throats. Hooker's "*causa finita est*" has been invoked in support of the view that, Lambeth having spoken, nothing remains to be said.

Yet a reading of Resolution 1.10 of Lambeth 1998 – with whatever sympathy and appreciation – does not quite support the view that it was meant to bring the whole discussion to a close.<sup>v</sup> The attempt to treat this text as a point of closure, rather than a disciplined overture to explorations yet to be conducted, puts excessive strain on it, and tends to frustrate, not further, its goal of shaping the practices of the Communion under

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the authority of Scripture. It meant, certainly, to set some fairly tightly drawn parameters: faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union; sexual abstinence as the right course for those not called to marriage; homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture. At the same time it recognised the existence of church members with a homosexual orientation who were seeking pastoral care, moral direction and God's transforming power for their lives and relationships; it committed itself to a process of listening to their experience; it called for pastoral and sensitive ministry to them, but it declined to "advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions" – the change of term may possibly mean that the pastoral problems of transsexualism were also at the back of bishops' minds. It condemned irrational fear of homosexuals, along with one or two other causes of indignation that tend to turn up at every party; it affirmed that baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ and loved by God, and requested a means of monitoring work done on the subject of human sexuality. It was, notoriously, a resolution improvised and hammered out on the floor of a plenary session, and a variety of entertaining and only partially reconcilable narratives soon came into circulation about how the procedural débacle arose. But three things are crystal clear: it was generally conservative in posture; it was overwhelmingly supported; it was open to further exploration. And exploration must be meant to make some difference; even if Lambeth would not envisage a major reorientation of its approach, it must have envisaged, in the light of greater pastoral experience and understanding, possibilities for considerable further nuance of detailed practice.

When the Windsor Report posed, as the alternative to its own approach, that "we shall have to begin to learn to walk apart", it clearly did not mean this as a *choiceworthy* alternative, one that the church of Jesus Christ could opt for with integrity. It was to be viewed as a horizon of total failure.<sup>vi</sup> Unhappily, it seems to have underestimated the capacity of Anglicans to think the unthinkable. The immediate effect of the hardening of the anti-revisionist position was to make the breach more likely; indeed, some voices, however little representative, did not hesitate to suggest that this was something to be welcomed. On the revisionist side the idea of an amicable separation of the ways had long been mooted – just another example of liberal other-worldliness, unfortunately, since the only separation ever to be looked for was bound to be far from amicable. To the anti-revisionists looking in this direction it was to be a solemn exercise of church discipline. A curious combination of ecclesiological influences, Calvinist and patristic, had already encouraged a number of bishops to raise their voices and announce the several combinations of churches and bishops with whom they were and were not in communion.

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The resulting untidiness in the Anglican world communion began to make some think that a shoot-out would be the desirable curtain-fall.

But this severely underestimated its difficulties. Such an occurrence would, for one thing, destroy the Anglican identity. The Anglican churches are not, and do not claim to be the whole Christian church as comprehended in its Augsburg-derived formulae.<sup>vii</sup> They are a particular communion of churches that mediates the Gospel in a shared tradition deriving from English history and the network of global relations springing from it. The Anglican identity is constituted by its particular continuities, and cannot survive a decisive breach in them. Even if we were to accept this as the price to be paid for a purer church, however, there is a more profound obstacle in the way of achieving purity by these means. The new configurations could not possibly be formed along the lines of the divided views over homosexuality. Separating evangelicals would actually not carry with them all, not even perhaps the majority, of those who sympathised with their anti-revisionist views. Many of their sympathisers are not evangelicals, and would certainly look for other alternatives. Many, not least evangelicals, would think such an act of separation wrong in principle. Not the new true ex-Anglicans, but the Roman Catholic church, already recruiting evangelical intellectuals by the dozen, would be the great winners (if we can speak of winners in this dismal scenario) from this disorderly explosion of Anglican forces. The idea of a united anti-revisionist Anglican church is as fantastic as the idea of an amicable parting of the ways.

The point of principle can be explored by posing the theological question: in the view of the New Testament, what grounds justify a deliberate breach in communion within the church? Two contradictory answers press themselves on us, each with apparent inevitability. On the one hand, we are never justified in breaking communion within the church of Jesus Christ, for schism is sin; on the other hand, communion implies and requires fundamental agreement in the Gospel. Those who "go out" from the church of Christ declare that they were not of it (1 John 2:18). Yet disagreement is not something we are free to relativise or set to one side. So unity in the truth turns out to be a commitment that may pull us in opposite directions to opposite conclusions: there is *no* communion-breaking moral disagreement, on the one hand; on the other, *any* disagreement is potentially communion-breaking. The one answer we cannot find is the answer we set out to find: *this*, rather than *that*, is the specific cause that will justify a breach.

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It is worth pausing to make a comparison with a similar moral antinomy, much discussed in the scholastic period: Is it right to obey a mistaken conscience? On the one hand obeying one's conscience is, apparently by definition, something it is *always* right to do. On the other hand, a mistaken conscience is, again by definition, a conscience that instructs you to do the wrong thing. So doing what a mistaken conscience tells you is to do right and wrong at the same time. There is a lesson to be learned from the deft way Aquinas, confronting this paradox of "perplexity", thrusts it aside. "One can withdraw from the error", he tells us.<sup>viii</sup> Commentators have expressed bewilderment at this, for it is, of course, not an answer to the question, but an evasion. It does not tell us what to do when our conscience is mistaken; it tells us not to have a mistaken conscience. Is Aquinas merely saying, "If that was where I wanted to go, I wouldn't start from here" - always a bad answer to a practical question, since "here" is where all practical questions start from? No: he means that there is something that the framing of the question has left out of account; the alternative is wrongly posed.

It beguiles us into imagining a helpless innocent pathetically trapped between the devil of dutiful wrongdoing and the deep blue sea of guilt-ridden right-doing. Moral reality is simply not like that. The perplexed actor always has a further recourse: she or he can *reconsider*. The conscience is not a fixed and unnegotiable natural force, but precisely "the mind of man making moral judgments". It can therefore be made use of, and if it leads to bewildering conclusions, it can be made use of again, to reflect on the validity of its own deliveries and hold them up to reflective scrutiny. On the best scenario further thought will correct the initial mistake; but even on the worst scenario the effort of critical reflection will break up the illusory appearance of conscience as a moral dictator, imposing just one course of action upon us, perhaps the wrong one! The very possibility of moral thinking transforms our experience of the conscience, which is directed to forming judgments, not delivering commands.

Just as Thomas cuts the Gordian knot with the proposal, "one can withdraw from the error", so we may suggest, "one can address the disagreement". Communion should not be broken, but that does not mean disagreement can be ignored. There are ways of addressing serious disagreements that affirm and renew communion by proven willingness and determination to resolve them. And the very attempt to reach a resolution transforms our experience of the disagreement. Disagreements are no more unnegotiable natural forces than deliveries of the mistaken conscience are. They are openings for those who share a common faith to explore and resolve important tensions *within* the context of communion.

This kind of proposal is, of course, easy to mishear. It can be taken to mean that parties to disagreements must be less than wholly convinced of their position, to make room for possible accommodation. When really serious issues are at stake and talk of a *status stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae* begins to rumble like thunder, urging the search for resolution can seem like an invitation to capitulate, to concede essential points before beginning. It can seem as though Scripture is deemed to be inconclusive and ambiguous, so that either side is free to concede the possible right of the other's interpretation. It can seem as though what is needed is an indefinite irresolution about everything important in which there is no need for, and no possibility of, a decisive closure. But that is all a trick of the light. None of this is implied in the search for agreement. The only thing I concede in committing myself to such a process is that if I could discuss the matter through with an opponent sincerely committed to the church's authorities, Scripture chief among them, the Holy Spirit would open up perspectives that are not immediately apparent, and that patient and scrupulous pursuit of these could lead at least to giving the problem a different shape – a shape I presume will be *compatible* with, though not precisely identical to, the views I now hold, but which may also be compatible with some of the views my opponent now holds, even if I cannot yet see how. I do not have to think I may be mistaken about the cardinal points of which I am convinced. The only thing I have to think – and this, surely, is not difficult on such a subject! - is that *there are things still to be learned* by one who is determined to be taught by Scripture how to read the age in which we live.

Every approach to resolving disagreements may turn out to fail. In the end God may have so hardened our hearts that we can see no way through our difficulties and simply find ourselves apart. God may in his judgment scatter a church that lacked the common will to search for its unity in the truth of the Gospel. And then there may come a point at which this situation has to be given some kind of institutional expression. Nothing can exclude *a priori* the worst possibility that certain persons or groups, or even whole churches, may be declared to have left the communion of Jesus Christ. But it must be a *declaration*, a formal statement of what has obviously come to pass. It cannot be an *act to produce a result*. The problem with the notion of separation is its expressive, self-purifying character. It will not wait for God to purify his own church in his own time. Schisms may come, but woe to that church through whom they come! There is no right, or duty, of schism. As unity is given to the church as a gift, so it is taken away as a judgment. But on no account can disunity be a course of action that the church may embrace in pursuit of its mission or identity. The only justified breach is the one we have

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taken every possible step to avert, the one that lies *on the far side* of every conciliar process that can be devised.

### *Discuss this Web Sermon on the Fulcrum Forum*

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/060627%20Archbishop%20-%20challenge%20and%20hope.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> See “The failure of the liberal paradigm” n5.

<sup>iii</sup> Communiqué Feb. 2005, §13. Cf. §14.

<sup>iv</sup> J.-Y. Lacoste, “Du phénomène de la valeur au discours de la norme”, in *Le monde et l'absence d'œuvre et autres études*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000, pp. 107-27.

<sup>v</sup> Let the reader judge: “This Conference: (a) commends to the Church the subsection report on human sexuality; (b) in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage; (c) recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ; (d) while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex; (e) cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions; (f) requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us; (g) notes the significance of the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Human Sexuality and the concerns expressed in resolutions IV.26, V.1, V.10, V.23 and V.35 on the authority of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality and asks the Primates and the ACC to include them in their monitoring process.”

<sup>vi</sup> *Windsor Report 2004*, §157. Indeed, its final words, building on a statement of the 2000 Primates' meeting, embody a decisive condemnation of this option: “to turn from one another would be to turn away from the Cross’, and indeed from serving the world which God loves and for which Christ died.”

<sup>vii</sup> Article 19: “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance...”

<sup>viii</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II-1.19 ad 3: *potest ab errore recedere*.