

To the priests and deacons who signed the Open Letter

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

July 2010

'God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you, but I will tell you the good and proper way.'
(1 Samuel 12:23)

These are grave times in the Church of England especially for those of us unable in good conscience to accept that any particular church has the authority to admit women to the episcopate. While we certainly accept the good faith of those who wish to make this change believing it to be God's will, we cannot rejoice with them, not least because of the disastrous cost to Catholic unity.

Our concerns are not only about sacramental assurance though that is of profound importance. If the legislation now proposed passes, it will not provide room for our tradition to grow and flourish. We will be dependent on a Code of Practice yet to be written, and sadly our experience of the last almost twenty years must make us wonder whether even such an inadequate provision will be honoured in the long term.

Neither the Report of the Revision Committee nor the legislation itself shows a proper understanding of our reservations, however carefully these have been presented through the consultation process and in the College and House of bishops. It remains a deep disappointment to us that the Church at large did not engage with the excellent Rochester Report and paid scant attention to the Consecrated Women report sponsored by Forward in Faith.

We must now accept that a majority of members of the Church of England believe it right to proceed with the ordination of women as bishops, and that a significant percentage of those in authority will not encourage or embrace with enthusiasm the traditional integrity or vocations within it. Nor is it their intention or desire to create a structure which genuinely allows the possibility of a flourishing mission beyond this generation.

However, the closeness of the vote on the Archbishops' amendment for co ordinate jurisdiction, concerns though there are about its adequacy, suggest at least a measure of disquiet in the majority about proceeding without a provision acceptable to traditionalists. The Catholic group fought valiantly on the floor of synod and we are grateful for that, and while many in the Church and press are speaking as if the legislation is now passed, final Synodical approval is still some way off.

Whatever happens in the Synod, there are some Anglo Catholics, including in our own number, who are already looking at, indeed are resolved to join the Ordinariate as the place where they can find a home in which to live and proclaim their Christian faith, in communion with the Holy Father, yet retaining something of the blessings they have known and experienced in the Anglican tradition. Of course the Ordinariate is a new thing, and not all of us are trailblazers or can imagine what it might be like. Some will undoubtedly want to wait and see how that initiative develops before making a decision.

Yet others will make their individual submission and find their future as Roman Catholics.

Were the present proposals not to be substantially amended or defeated, many more of us will need to consider seriously these options.

A number will remain, perhaps even reluctantly because of personal circumstances, family loyalties, even financial necessity, but with a deep sense of unease about the long term future, an unease that is surely well founded. There are faithful Catholic clergy and lay people, though deeply opposed to the likely Synodical decision who cannot currently imagine themselves being anywhere else but within the Church of England. They wonder how they can stay, yet cannot imagine leaving their much loved church and parish. They do not want to be forced out of the Church they love and will persevere where they are, whatever the theological or ecclesiological ambiguities, and seek God's blessing on all they do.

Those who are not actively seeking a home elsewhere must work to defeat the currently proposed legislation. It is essential that traditionalists engage in the debate and discussion in their diocese and are active in the election process for the next quinquennium of the General Synod when the two thirds majority in each House will be required if the legislation is to pass. Whatever our individual futures, and however disheartened we might feel, the Church of England needs strong catholic hearts and voices.

The text quoted at the beginning of this letter was the one used by John Keble in his famous Assize sermon, often regarded as the starting point of the Oxford Movement. It seems remarkably apposite, and gives a clue to an appropriate attitude of heart for this process: prayerful and gracious, but clear.

We are all bishops united in our belief that the Church of England is mistaken in its actions. However, we must be honest and say we are not united as to how we should respond to these developments.

Nevertheless we are clear that each of the possibilities we have outlined has its own integrity and is to be honoured. We are resolved to respect the decisions made by laity, bishops, priests and deacons of our integrity, and call on you to do the same. It would be a sad and destructive thing indeed if we allowed our unhappiness and wondering to drift into unguarded or uncharitable criticism of those who in good conscience take a different path from our own. We must assume the best motives in one another, and where there are partings let them be with tears and the best wishes of Godspeed.

You will we hope know of the clergy meetings in both provinces to take place in late September when there will be opportunities for discussion and an exchange of views about the future. Be assured of our prayers as you reflect about how best to respond to the challenges which face us, and we ask your prayers for us too as we seek to be faithful to the Lord, and to the Faith once delivered.

Please share the contents of this letter with your people, and indeed with any who might be interested to know of it.

The Rt Revd John Hind, Bishop of Chichester
The Rt Revd Geoffrey Rowell, Bishop of Europe
The Rt Revd Nicholas Reade, Bishop of Blackburn
The Rt Revd Keith Newton, Bishop of Richborough
The Rt Revd Martyn Jarrett, Bishop of Beverley
The Rt Revd John Broadhurst, Bishop of Fulham
The Rt Revd Peter Wheatley, Bishop of Edmonton
The Rt Revd John Goddard, Bishop of Burnley
The Rt Revd Andrew Burnham, Bishop of Ebbsfleet
The Rt Revd Tony Robinson, Bishop of Pontefract
The Rt Revd John Ford, Bishop of Plymouth
The Rt Revd Mark Sowerby, Bishop of Horsham
The Rt Revd Martin Warner, Bishop of Whitby
The Rt Revd Robert Ladds
The Rt Revd Lindsay Urwin OGS