



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – August 2010

The General Synod at York

TIS now 40 years since the Church of England General Synod came into being. It was an exciting new development, replacing an even more cumbersome system of dual control by Convocations of Clergy and the Church Assembly. The laity at last had a full and effective voice in the government of the Church of England. There were some safeguards in place. Certain matters had to be passed by two thirds' majority and there could be a call for a vote by Houses, even when one was not strictly required. That meant that there needed to be majorities in each of the three Houses, Bishops, Clergy, and Laity.

It was this last safeguard which torpedoed the attempt of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to introduce an amendment to safeguard the ministry of traditionalist bishops. (As far as the democratic process is concerned, the archbishops are simply two members of the Synod). The amendment was voted down by five votes in the House of Clergy. This followed an earlier vote, where only 34% of the Synod supported new dioceses. Finally the whole draft Measure was approved, the only safeguard for traditionalists being the promise of a Code of Practice. The matter now moves from the General Synod, whose quinquennium has now ended, to the dioceses. It will return from there to the new General Synod. In 18 months' time, November 2012, the hope of supporters of women bishops is that the Measure will be finally passed by the necessary two-thirds majority in each House, the hurdle which the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood Measure cleared on November 1992. Thereafter it must pass muster in Parliament, receive the Royal Assent, and be promulgated as a canon. Last time, all of that took another 15 months, which would take us to February 2014, with the first consecrations of women bishops soon thereafter.

Traditionalists have been beaten four-square. When (though, strictly, it is still 'If') the Measure comes into force, there will be no more Resolution A and B, no more 'petitioning parishes'. There will be no more 'flying bishops', no more Beverley, Ebbsfleet, and Richborough. There will be again the assurance of good behaviour: no one will be overfaced by women priests and bishops ministering where they are not wanted. But there will be no guarantees (and, increasingly, no likelihood) that male bishops and priests ministering to us will share those convictions, or derive their orders from an unbroken apostolic succession of bishops in the Catholic line. Avoiding women ministers will become not a conviction about Catholic Order, shared throughout the ages, but a matter of sexual discrimination, abhorrent to all of us. In a very short time, it will have become unacceptable to invoke a sexist Code of Practice.

It is important for us all to understand how momentous all this is and what the implications are for our life together. I was never very hopeful of the Archbishops' amendment, though it was good that it was debated. It would not have brought a clear and certain place for the Catholic understanding of Faith and Order. But it would have allowed a new generation of Provincial Episcopal Visitors – flying bishops – to try to work out, with the Archbishops, some sort of corporate life for our priests, people, and parishes. It is fair to say that both Archbishops wanted that. Moreover 60% of the bishops in Synod (though not two thirds) were prepared, more or less enthusiastically, to support the Archbishops and accept their spiritual lead.

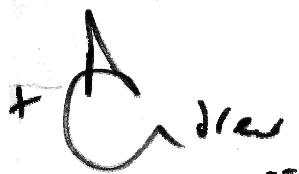
Come the final judgment when, as the Prayer Book says in the Marriage Service, 'the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed', some will have to account for the broken promises of the early 1990s. Traditionalists were then assured of a permanent and honoured place. Great store was set by the doctrine of reception (whereby no change in Holy Order would finally thought to be 'received' until it was accepted by the ancient churches of East and West). It was on the basis of these promises - both now very hollow - that Provincial Episcopal Visitors were appointed, ordinands and their families exchanged comfortable life styles for theological college, curacies, and what promised to be a lifetime of ministry, and

parishes set to work energetically with the task of evangelism and catechesis. However honourably these promises were made, there were liberal pressure groups intent on destroying them. These liberal pressure groups are not full of bad people: the women and men concerned were always exasperated that the Church made such high-sounding, but undeliverable, promises. In their view –the view that has prevailed – we all simply needed to get used to the new ‘inclusive’ way of doing things. In their view, twenty years is quite long enough for that to have happened. But there have been broken promises indeed and some supporters of the women bishops’ project recognise that and seek forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

For Ebbsfleet, the critical vote came when nearly two thirds of the General Synod rejected the creation of new dioceses. The only sense we have been able to make of the whole Ebbsfleet project these last sixteen years (of which I have been bishop for nearly ten), is that the See of Ebbsfleet is an ‘Apostolic District’. That is, it is an area of the vineyard which seeks to grow into, and become, a ‘local Church’, a ‘diocese’. To that end, we have had our Stational Masses of Initiation, our Ordinations, and our Chrism Masses. We have had our Area Deans and Deaneries, our Council of Priests, our Lay Council, and our Lay Congress. We have also had parish evangelism weekends and research into resources for catechesis and formation. We have had clergy retreats, festivals of faith, and the annual Children and Young People’s Eucharistic Festival. Our churches have been as well-attended as most, with, if anything, more than our share of men, children, young families, and other endangered categories of church-goer. Here was a new kind of diocese, not without its problems, but with promising signs. ‘In house’ there has been very little discussion of ‘church issues’ and that in itself has made us vulnerable. We have never been attacked by anyone who got to know us and experienced our corporate life. It has always been fear of who we might be, what we might represent, rather than what we actually are.

For now, the prescription is for some serious summer rest and to get some praying and thinking done. I shall be addressing these issues further in the September Pastoral letter, at a Sacred Synod for clergy, and at the Ebbsfleet Lay Conference, but, for now, at least we know where we are. It is time to stop trying to make bricks without straw.

May God bless you as you seek to discern, obey, and trust his will.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew', with a small cross symbol to the left.

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