



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – May 2010

Last month RITA, this month the Synodical Process

M EETING right at the end of the current synodical quinquennium, the York residential General Synod this July will have before it the recommendations of a legislative drafting committee. The aim has been to have women bishops in the Church of England but, at the same time, to make some sort of provision for those of us who can't accept that the Church of England is competent to proceed with ordaining women bishop. We have chanted 'a code of practice won't do' at Forward in Faith assemblies and yet it seems likely that it is, after all, a code of practice which will be finally on offer. A code of practice – saying, roughly, that no one will be forced to receive the ministry of woman bishops – would be better, one might think, than nothing at all. One imagines a gradual process, with a dwindling number of parishes and priests unable to accept the new ways. Anything which makes life easier for them to get on with the vital tasks of mission and teaching is surely to be welcomed....

I think we need to be clear, however, why a code of practice won't really do, even if many are obliged in the end to rub along with such a code. For one thing, codes of practice can be changed rather easily. For another, codes of practice aren't very easy to enforce. (I was on the way back from a House of Bishops' meeting, where we had talked about women bishops and codes of practice, and, on the radio was a programme about rabbit farming. I chuckled as I heard them saying that the problem with rabbit farming was that it was regulated only by a code of practice and that codes of practice were impossible to enforce). These problems with codes of practice, however, are nothing like as severe as the real problem with a code of practice over women bishops. The real problem is that, once you move away from the traditional faith and order of the Church, and have admitted people to holy order, without regard to gender, any code of practice blocking the ministry of women is simply a licence for sexual discrimination. I might think (as I happen to) that, though women should be allowed to serve in the armed services, they should not fight on the front line. But that doesn't mean that, if I lose the argument (which over women servicemen I know that I already have), there should be special arrangements for my point of view. Or, to put it another way, you can't have a church which both has women bishops and doesn't have women bishops.

But what has changed, you may ask? We have had special arrangements for 17 years: but that was always on the understanding that the Church had not yet reached a mind on it, and would not do so until all the churches agreed. That's the bit the Bishops, as guarantors of doctrine, have fudged. They have moved on from the temporary expedient of accepting women priests – and allowing people not to – to the point where women are consecrated as bishops. For, whatever a bishop is, he is neither temporary nor an expedient: he links us back to the apostles and throughout the world in faith and order.

It's not over yet. We must see what July brings – even those of us who believe in RITA (last month's letter), that the Pope's offer of an Anglican Ordinariate must be considered in its own right as Plan A and not Plan B. The July Synod will at least show us whether the Church of England prefers Catholic consensus or Protestant dissent. And then there are the General Synod elections in the autumn... .

May God bless you as we journey on..

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