



Electing a New General Synod

IN MY August Pastoral Letter, I said that I should continue to reflect on current issues in the September letter. Normally one looks for a different, and unrelated topic, but these are not normal times. We have seen the dissolution of the 2005–2010 General Synod and with it the dispersion of its 'Catholic Group in General Synod', one of the informal groupings in the Synod. New elections will take place shortly and the 2010–2015 General Synod will be inaugurated by the Queen in November. As happens every five years, there will be an inaugural meeting of the new 'Catholic Group' and people will be counting up how many are in the Group, bishops, clergy and laity, and what kind of line they will be taking. That much is predictable and the pattern for it long-established. The officers of the 'Catholic Group' will already be in place (provided they have managed themselves to be elected to the Synod) and the Chairman will already have a sense of the direction in which he will want to lead the Group.

Until the July 2010 vote, the second catastrophic vote for Anglo-catholics in three years, there was a division of opinion. One section wanted, on principle, to vote down the women bishops' legislation completely, on the grounds that Catholic Faith and Order does not traditionally admit women to holy orders and the Church of England has no more competence to change the tradition than it has to change the bible, the creeds, or the sacraments. This section still sees its duty to witness to the Catholic Faith, as the Church of England has received it, and not to give up until the 'final approval' vote is lost in 2012 (if, indeed, it is lost). The 'final approval' vote on women bishops will need a two-thirds majority in each of the three houses of Synod and it is possible, of course, that it will not clear this hurdle in all three houses. (One projection is that it might fail in the house of laity).

The second section of opinion, broadly that of Forward in Faith, was that women bishops are inevitable sooner or later, because of the admission of women to the orders of deacon and priest, and that what is needed is a proper framework, proper provision, for those who maintain the historic and traditional view. The sooner the better. Forward in Faith favoured a free province, but three separate dioceses would amount to that, and that was firmly defeated in July. The archbishops' amendment also might have permitted some sort of framework to be built on statutory transfer of jurisdiction. That was narrowly lost on a vote of houses. (It is hard to build a Catholic ecclesiology, incidentally, on a system which allows priests and deacons to vote down the attempts of archbishops and bishops in areas of Faith and Order. Are the procedures of General Synod in any sense 'Catholic'?) What is apparently on offer, intended to meet the needs of this section of opinion, is a 'code of practice'. Bishops and all who exercise patronage would agree to behave honourably and try to both respect people's needs and their deeply-held beliefs.

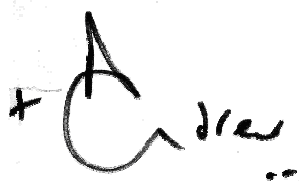
Following the July 2010 vote, this second section of opinion has had to do some fresh thinking. Forward in Faith assemblies have chanted, as 'the response to the psalm', 'A code of practice will not do'. Anglo-catholics are programmed then to reject a code of practice and it is important to understand why. For one thing, codes of practice are advisory and not mandatory. Discretion, discernment, goodwill, and good sense are all necessary for codes of practice to work. Catholic orders and sacraments cannot depend on discretion, discernment, goodwill, and good sense. Indeed a major characteristic of Catholic orders and sacraments is that they exist regardless of any of these things, even if some of these things are necessary for them to be of benefit to the faithful. Whatever it is, the Eucharist, celebrated by someone not in the historic succession, or not using the right elements or words, and not having the right intention, is not a Catholic sacrament. The same is true of Absolution, Confirmation, Ordination, and the Blessing of Oils. The argument here is not about the sex of the celebrant. Anglo-catholics (unlike many in the Church of England) have exactly the same problem with non-conformist ministers and lay presidents as they do with women clergy. What we need, we say, is 'sacramental certainty', a matter which the Chairman of the Catholic Group, Canon Simon Killwick, explained lucidly in the *Church Times* of 30 July

2010. That means that, in sacraments, God is doing something which does not depend on our response, though it invites our response. It happens, as they say, *ex opera operato*, just because it happens. To think otherwise is not what the Catholic Faith teaches. A code of practice won't do!

That means that Anglo-catholics who are standing for election for the General Synod, or voting in General Synod elections, are standing, or voting, to defeat the women bishops' legislation. It is hard to see how, in terms of process, any provision whatsoever could be made now – following the severe set-back in York in July – which allowed women bishops to be consecrated and, at the same time, traditional Anglo-catholics conscientiously to remain in the Church of England. But it ain't over until it's over. No-one in November 1992, when the final approval for women priests took place, could have guessed that a few months later the House of Bishops would cobble together the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993, with its promise of a permanent and honoured place for those who could not accept the development.

Some of you will now be asking why I am picking at the carcass rather than just declaring it dead and moving on to embrace the offer of Pope Benedict XVI to Anglicans in *Anglicanorum cœtibus*. The Pope's offer is not a bargain basement sale. It isn't 'clearance' or 'end of roll' or 'while stocks last'. Nor is it a rescue plan for shipwrecked Anglo-catholics. It is a way of pursuing the ecumenical journey to which we have been committed for a very long time and it must be considered in its own right. That I propose to do in a third Pastoral Letter in October, the third in a series of letters. Meanwhile I think we continue to pray, reflect, and rest, and, of course, ponder and reflect during the visit of the Pope to England later in September, what we should now do, each one of us. Most of all, as the Holy Father comes among us as the leader of the Christian family, we pray for the coming of the Kingdom and the triumph of the Gospel over the forces of evil and indifference.

May God bless you as you faithfully serve him and his Church.

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

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