

Towards an Exercise of Primacy in the 21st Century

Response from Nicholas Sagovsky – Anglican perspective

From the perspective of your communion, which of these proposals do you find particularly promising for advancing ecumenical dialogue on the Bishop of Rome's ministry of unity?

I have been asked to speak from the perspective of my own Communion, the Anglican Communion. Given our current situation, where we are waiting for the appointment of a new Archbishop of Canterbury, the proposal which most catches my eye is that in paragraph 15-16: 'that a *clearer distinction be made between the different responsibilities of the Pope*'. Amongst the bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury is *primus inter pares*. He has a presidential role, but, effectively, no jurisdiction over provinces other than the Church of England. He is Primate of All England. He also has episcopal responsibility for the Diocese of Canterbury, in which his cathedral is situated. His home is in London at Lambeth Palace, where he has a small staff. With the resignation of Archbishop Justin Welby, there is currently much discussion about whether the role of the Archbishop within the Anglican Communion, which involves a great deal of travelling, should be more clearly distinguished from that of the Primate of All England. This is one area where there could be a useful discussion between Anglican and Catholic ecclesiologists.

Paragraph 15 refers to the Pope's 'patriarchal ministry in the Latin Church and his primatial ministry in the communion of Churches'. I suggest there could be some serious ecumenical dialogue around the extent to which the Bishop of Rome *already* has a *de facto* primatial role amongst the separated churches of the West. As Christians of a 'western' tradition, many Anglicans would readily affirm the spiritual authority (but not the universal jurisdiction) of a Bishop of Rome who teaches authentic Christian truth. We have seen this during the pastoral visits to the UK of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. There are missional situations, like the visit of Pope Francis, Archbishop Justin Welby and Iain Greenshields, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, to Sudan (2023), where the natural leader is the Bishop of Rome. Could the pastoral, primatial ministry of a future Bishop of Rome be formally recognized within the communion of Churches which are united by a common baptism *precisely because* such recognition carried no juridical implications? Formal recognition by non-Catholic Christians of Francis as President (not Patriarch!) of the Western Church could be an important step forward in an ecumenical understanding of synodality, taking us nearer to a shared, synodical understanding of his primatial ministry.

A key word here is that introduced in paragraph 13: *subsidiarity* – which derives from the Latin *subsidium* meaning 'help' or 'support' – or even 'reserve', as in military 'reserves'. The question to be pursued in the dialogues, it seems to me, is how can the ministry of the Bishop of Rome be truly subsidiary (truly *supportive*, held 'in *reserve*') not only for Catholic churches but for the ecumenical communion of all the Churches? Here, I suggest, it is helpful to look at the deployment of this word in political theory (it is central to European Union law) and in the social teaching of the Catholic church. I would question whether, given the social and political origins of this principle, it necessarily presupposes that (to quote paragraph 13) 'authority is delegated downwards from the higher level'. In the light of the massive exploration of synodality that has taken place in recent years, I think it is clear that Christian authority is immanent in the life of the whole Church (the body of all the baptized),

though it falls to the college of bishops, and within the college of bishops to the Bishop of Rome, to bring that authority to bear in a manner that supports the flourishing of the whole church. I suggest that one problem which needs careful, theological investigation is the language of ‘levels’ within the Church. We need language to describe, within the communion of the churches, a structure of increased responsibility which moves ‘up’ from ‘the many’ through ‘some’ to the ‘one’. What we do *not* need is language that describes a hierarchy of ‘levels’ that is taken to describe a *hierarchy of importance*, or *delegation* from a ‘higher’ to a ‘lower’ level. How can we best describe a subsidiary ‘hierarchy’ of ministerial responsibility (cf. Luke 22:27, ‘I am among you as one who serves’)? A discussion such as this would be in line with paragraph 7: the need for ‘*clarification of the vocabulary used by the dialogues*’.

There is further work to be done on the *re-reception of Vatican I* (cf. paragraph 14). It is well-known that *Pastor Aeternus* (4) asserts that infallible definitions concerning faith and morals by the Pope are irreformable ‘*ex sese non autem ex consensu ecclesiae*’ (‘of themselves and not by the *consensus* of the church’). It seems to me that *Pastor Aeternus* does not make sufficiently clear, as *a sine qua non*, the necessity for the *consensus* of the church *before* the Pope defines teaching infallibly (though it claims that Popes have in the past ‘defined as doctrines to be held those things which they knew to be in keeping with sacred scripture and apostolic traditions’). Could it be that a *re-lecture* which read the affirmation in *Pastor Aeternus* to mean ‘*ex sese non autem **sine** consensu ecclesiae*’ (‘of themselves but not without the *consensus* of the church’) would set the doctrine securely in a synodical context? It would help to meet longstanding Anglican concerns about arbitrary papal definition of new doctrines.

We should note that the publication of the Study Document, *The Bishop of Rome*, was timed to coincide with the opening of the second session of the Plenary Assembly of the ‘Synod on Synodality’ (October 2024). In the Synod, the *synodal shaping* of the Catholic Church (cf. paragraph 17) was demonstrated before all the Churches. There was much in the way the Synod was conducted from which all the Churches can learn and on which the ecumenical dialogues can usefully reflect. The method of ‘Conversation in the Spirit’, as an exercise in listening to God and to each other and together discerning the way in which the Spirit is leading the Church, is a gift for all the Churches. It strikes me that Anglicans, with our hierarchy of synods, in which laity are fully represented, can learn much from this. The fact that we have such synods does not mean that they serve the synodality of the Church well. At the Rome Synod we saw in operation an *ethic of synodality* for which humble, prayerful mutual listening is central – to be followed by patient and courageous discernment of an agreed way forward. It is precisely such an ethic that needs to be practised and promoted within the ecumenical dialogues so that they may themselves be seen as truly ‘Conversations in the Spirit’.