



NORTH AMERICAN SECRETARIAT

June 30, 2004

Dear Archbishop Eames and Members of the Lambeth Commission on Communion:

The Executive Committee of Affirming Anglican Catholicism submits this statement in support of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America's (ECUSA) action with respect to the consecration of the Rt. Rev. V. Gene Robinson and, specifically, in response to the following "key questions" enumerated by the Commission as the focus of its inquiry:

- I. Affirming Anglican Catholicism respectfully suggests that ECUSA's action with respect to the diocesan election of the Rev. Canon V. Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire and his subsequent confirmation at General Convention is an expression of the true catholicity of the universal Church as it seeks to respond to a local Church representing the Body of Christ in a particular place at a particular time, not a "communion-breaking" event.**

From its establishment in 1789, ECUSA has been both resolutely and unwaveringly catholic in its theology and, at the same time, determinedly democratic in its polity.

This distinctive character of ECUSA – holding in creative tension the essential tenets of the historic catholic faith and the necessary qualities of a democracy as reflected in the American state – was largely conceived by the Rev. William White, Rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia (who, at the same time, was serving as Chaplain to the new nation's Congress, a fact that was to inform his work in shaping ECUSA's governing structure significantly).

By 1792, White had succeeded in creating a federal form of polity for ECUSA which embodied those democratic values— a polity that remains essentially unchanged today – and, at the same time, established the primary authority of Scripture by providing for its interpretation within the historical teaching and tradition of the Church through reason and interpretation discerned through dialogue within the community of faith.

In seeking an historical ecclesial model for ECUSA, White rejected the medieval and contemporary centralized forms. Rather, he turned to the patristic Church, finding there an example of the fullness of *koinonia* displayed in the various autonomous local churches assembled around their bishops, a structure in which the local churches freely but voluntarily cooperated with one another. In the words of the 19th Century Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral, the standard for American ecumenical endeavors, the patristic model of the "historic Episcopate, locally adapted" proved to be ideally suited to the newly organized church in the newly formed democratic federation.¹

AFFIRMING ANGLICAN CATHOLICISM

Today, ECUSA continues to be governed according to essentially the same model as originally conceived by White at its founding: acting as the General Convention on the national level, and locally in the diocesan convention, where the community of faith (representing bishops, priests and the laity) participates directly and prayerfully in the governance of ECUSA in accordance with fundamentally American democratic principles.

The decision to elect Canon Robinson as Bishop was made by the local community of faith assembled in the Diocese of New Hampshire in accordance with the polity of that Diocese and confirmed, after prayerful consideration, by the General Convention, in compliance with its canons, rules and regulations.

Such a lawful decision, as an exercise of human reason, after democratic dialogue and prayerful consideration, in no way can be considered a “communion-breaking” event – particularly when there is no contrary established doctrine of the Church “necessary to salvation” at issue.

In seeking to make any statement which might be construed as establishing or articulating authoritative Church doctrine with respect to the particular underlying issues of human sexuality, both the principle of catholicity and the long accepted Anglican belief that scripture on the one hand and tradition and reason/experience on the other mutually inform each other recommend a reserve in the rush to judgment.

The Church is only at the beginning of understanding the huge complexities of human sexuality as it relates to the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Time is needed to test whether homosexuality might not be more than a tolerated but diminished form of divine imaging in the human person.

This theological work on the reception of the full-range of human experience and its correlation to the “deposit of faith” is hardly complete and in many areas it has hardly begun. It is a virtue of Anglicanism to allow these disputed questions a “long lead.” Only with time for reflection can the contours of God’s catholicity for the Church – ever before us – be fully explored and our understanding of Christian personhood be expanded.

II. Affirming Anglican Catholicism respectfully maintains that ECUSA, having acted in accordance with its laws of polity as a particular local church established with its distinctive democratic principles of governance, is, therefore, not properly subject to any discipline or other form of intervention by the Anglican Communion or any commission appointed by it.

The universal Church is but a web of particular local churches and the principal of local autonomy among those local churches is well-established. It has long been accepted within the Communion that the local church is independent, “enjoying an authority and freedom to govern itself according to its own constitutional and canonical system.”² Indeed, there is no formal Anglican canon law globally applicable to and binding upon member churches of the Communion. Furthermore, “no central institution exists with competence to create such a body of law.”³

AFFIRMING ANGLICAN CATHOLICISM

In fact, intervention by another church of the Communion or entity acting on behalf of the Communion in the affairs of ECUSA for actions which have been taken lawfully in accordance with its polity, pertaining to wholly parochial matters of governance within a diocese of ECUSA, and not in contravention of any established articles of faith of the Church, would be decidedly un-Anglican and violate those long-established and respected principles of autonomy.

According to its democratic principles of governance, ECUSA trusts that the decisions of the communities of faith in the local churches of its several dioceses, arrived at after dialogue, prayerful consideration and, finally, democratic vote in compliance with the relevant canonical laws, rules and regulations, reflect the graced presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. It recognizes that the United States of America is a vast country, in its own way as culturally diverse in some respects as some nations of the Communion are from one another.

ECUSA's federal form of polity accommodates that diversity and yet holds the national church together in the General Convention where local decisions are confirmed and national policies are established through a process of discernment, prayer, consensus and, ultimately democratic vote. From time to time, ECUSA, in the course of deciding issues of church governance, is called to evaluate changes in the culture in particular locations by consulting with the communities of faith of local churches through the democratic process.

The election of Canon Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire by the people of New Hampshire was such an event: the lawful action of a local and autonomous church within ECUSA's federal system reflecting a cultural change. ECUSA's confirmation of New Hampshire's action does not conflict with or violate the autonomy of any other church of the Communion. Consequently, there is no basis for any act of censure or reprimand to be taken against ECUSA.

III. Affirming Anglican Catholicism respectfully suggests that ECUSA's action is wholly consistent with being in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury and, indeed, celebrates that relationship.

If to be in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury is to trust and respect each other to respond authentically to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the local Church in pursuit of its mission, then ECUSA's action should be regarded as a celebration of its participation in the Communion and not as an attempt to impair or break its relationship with the See of Canterbury or any other member of the Anglican Communion.

The Anglican Communion is not a legal entity. It is a "fellowship, within the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, of those duly constituted dioceses, provinces and regional Churches in communion with the See of Canterbury." More particularly, it is a fellowship of churches that have affirmed their mutual accountability in certain matters of faith and doctrine as set forth in the Lambeth Quadrilateral and adopted at the Lambeth Conference of 1888, while at the same time affirming the member churches' autonomy with respect to their own governance.⁴

More than anything else, the Communion relies on mutual respect and trust for its very existence, especially in times of disagreement and conflict. Indeed, we recognize that the Anglican value of autonomy and its simultaneous commitment to cohere in a Communion will inevitably lead to such tension, especially during times of cultural or social change in the local provinces.

AFFIRMING ANGLICAN CATHOLICISM

However, the principles and tradition that lie at the heart of Anglicanism and, indeed, form the foundation of ECUSA suggest that it is precisely at such times that the need for dialogue is paramount. Equally important is the need for patience: the passage of sufficient time for the dialogue to occur, for reason and understanding to ripen, for the experience of cultural change to mature among the people, for the Holy Spirit to work its ultimate will – and for this to happen without the stigma of reproach, reprimand, abandonment or censure or unseemly grasps at power.

ECUSA has and is engaged in that process of dialogue - within itself and within the wider Communion. Within ECUSA, each diocese is finding its way – in its own time, at its own pace and in its own particular way - to respond to the changes that are reflected in the American culture with respect to issues of human sexuality, many of which invariably and necessarily affect the life of the local community of faith. As a national church, ECUSA is and will continue to work to hold those local and autonomous dioceses together as a strong worshipping community as they work to discern the will of the Holy Spirit for them as a community of faith and continue to seek to understand the full meaning of catholicity with respect to the issues that face the universal Church today.

ECUSA is and will remain an Episcopal church, fully embracing the catholic faith, consistent with its belief in the principles of Christian liberty as embodied in its polity and steadfastly affirming its commitment to the Anglican Communion.

We submit that ECUSA will be best able to achieve these goals if it is permitted to continue its work with respect for its autonomy and in recognition of its continuing respect for its relationship with the Anglican Communion.

Respectfully submitted,

The Executive Committee of Affirming Anglican Catholicism, N.A.

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1 *See*, Prichard, Richard, *A History of the Episcopal Church*, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991, pp. 84-103.

2. Doe, Norman, *The Canon Law in the Anglican Communion: A Worldwide Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1998, p.339.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p.340