

Ordination, Apostolic Succession, and Ecumenism

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Abstract: Inherent in today's Christianity is the differing approaches to central theological and practical questions by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant denominations, and the division among these denominations is contrary to the love and unity of Christ. Enter ecumenism; women's ordination relates closely to ecumenism by way of questions regarding episcopacy and apostolic succession. My research focuses on the centrality of apostolic succession to ecumenism. This paper surveys documents that have come out of discussions between Northern European, American, and Canadian Lutherans and Anglicans on their way to full communion with each other. In particular, it surveys the way their strikingly different theologies of apostolic succession shaped their interactions with one another, and what theological moves were made that enabled them to finally enter into full communion with one another. I conclude with a series of questions and observations: what can Christianity at large take from these discussions? What is inherent in questions of episcopacy? Are some items theologically central while others are flexible? How do we make sense of the different historical trajectories that various Christian denominations have taken while maintaining the integrity of the apostolic faith? How does ecclesiology solve or not solve differences? What is keeping divided Christendom divided? In particular, I will draw on the ecumenical theology and ecclesiology of Yves Congar to make my reflections. This methodology is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of Congar's theology; rather, I use his theology to interpret these the dialogue among Anglicans and Lutherans that led to their full communion. The reason I am focusing specifically on dialogues between Northern European, American and Canadian Anglicans and Lutherans is that these are the dialogues that actually led to full communion. They are not intellectual exercises; they are truly practical examples of ecumenism from which Christianity can and should glean wisdom.

Ecclesiology is a key concept in the topic of ecumenism. This research aims to offer a Catholic perspective on discussions between Northern European, American, and Canadian Lutherans and Anglicans/Episcopalians on their way to full communion with each other. The reason for focusing on these discussions specifically is that these are the dialogues that actually led to full communion. As such, they are not intellectual exercises, but practical examples of ecumenism from which Christianity as a whole can and should glean wisdom.

Women's ordination relates closely to both areas as it relates to episcopacy and apostolic succession. As such, this paper aims to focus specifically on the topic of ordained ministry as a central element of ecclesiology, and what it reveals to be the heart of ecclesiological difference that are at the heart of ecumenical dialogue.

The method this paper will utilize is to survey the documents that have come out of these discussions between Northern European, American, and Canadian Lutherans and Anglicans on their way to full communion with each other, making pertinent observations. In particular, it surveys the way the strikingly different theologies of apostolic succession and ordination held by these different denominations shaped their interactions with one another, and, additionally, what theological moves were made that enabled them to finally enter into full communion with one another.

Ecclesiology

Let us begin with the following claim: A majority of theological topics separating denominations are rooted in ecclesiology.

Martin Luther's various 16th-century critiques of the Catholic Church reveal such topics as justification, the practice of confession, indulgences – all of which revolve around one central question: *who* has the power to forgive sins? Can grace be compromised once a

person has been saved in baptism, and who has the authority to decide? A Catholic would say that Christ clearly gives the apostles the power to forgive and to bind sins, and Luther would highlight the corruption of the papacy of the time as nullifying or, perhaps, redirecting the power of grace to one's personal relationship to Christ. Other topics might include the number and practice of sacraments, transubstantiation, and interpreting the Bible. All of these topics revolve around the concept of revelation: where do the faithful hear God's voice? Is the Holy Spirit active in the hierarchy as a partner to the Scriptures and in fact their interpreter, or are the Scriptures alone the voice of revelation? Other topics might include ministry – what can we say about the ministry all Christians are called to by virtue of their baptism, and how does it differ from the special ministry of leadership in the Church? Is ordination a sacrament? Does it make a person ontologically different than the non-ordained? This short and non-exhaustive list keeps pointing again and again back to the topic of ecclesiology. The concept of Church, its governance, its ontological reality, the way God works in and through it, and issues of authority.

If we were to continue onward and look at concepts separating today's Christians, an even broader list emerges. Abortion and contraception, female ordination, Eucharistic theology, governance, and other topics are as much political as they are theological. And they too, seem to all point back to the central question: who has the power? Surely God has the power, but through which channels does God exercise that power? The reality of the Church is simultaneously practical and theological. It includes both the beliefs about how God chooses to act on Earth, as well as implications for how Churches will organize themselves, their sacramental practices, governance, and decision-making processes. They are at once earthly and eternal questions.

Ordained ministry seems to be at the very heart of the ecclesiology involved in ecumenism. The Catholic Church as well as the Anglican and Episcopal Churches in the U.S. and Canada highly value the concept of Apostolic succession as the ordination of one bishop by another stemming all the way back to the apostles by the laying on of hands. The Lutheran Church, however, most often appears in these debates to suggest that simply being removed by 2,000 years and countless redirections in both theology and practice makes the laying on of hands and the overall concept of the historic episcopate a mere formality, guaranteeing no continuity of ontological status. Rather, it is the continuity in *ministry* that the Lutheran Church wants to emphasize as important, and this is surely done most of all through simple faithfulness by ALL the faithful to the Scriptures, without the adiaphora of laying on of hands. Faithfulness to the teachings of Christ as present in the Scriptures is the only constitutive element to the ministry of Christ.

Now, we might stop here and solve the issue easily by positing: isn't the disagreement over apostolic succession something about which various Christian denominations might simply have a legitimate plurality of opinions? Or, could not these two communions reunite as Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries, in their book *The Unity of the Churches*¹, suggest, by having Catholic bishops present at the ordinations of Lutherans (and other Churches not currently in the line of apostolic succession) while *also* having leadership from the other Church present. This kind of co-ordination would, it would seem, satisfy both the people looking for a legitimate link to the apostles as well as those for whom it does not matter, right? Why would this not work?

¹ Fries, Heinrich and Karl Rahner. *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*. Trans. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1983.

According to several of the published statements coming out of ecumenical dialogues between Episcopalians and Lutherans in Canada, the problem here is that it is contrary to the fellowship, communion, and *koinonia* that full communion entails. It would be insulting to the ministries of non-historic episcopates to suggest any illegitimacy if it were not done this way. Any practice that involves re-apostolizing, as it were, the ministers of one Church so that they are once again legitimate in the other seems to simply make them Anglican, or Catholic, whatever the case may be. It is one-sided. And yet, anything less than that is unacceptable to denominations for whom apostolic succession *is* a constitutive element of the ordained ministry. It seems we are at a standstill.

Ecumenism

Here is where we should step back and ask: what is the goal of ecumenism? Is it full communion or total reunification of denominations? Or is there something to be said for diversity of theology and practice among Christians? A survey of both Catholic and Protestant literature on this question yields a variety of answers, but the overall consensus, especially from the Catholic tradition, seems to be: no. Nothing less than full communion and complete reunification is not only desirable, but a constitutive element and necessary feature of Christ's Church on Earth.

The aforementioned *Unity of the Churches* by Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries is what they call a "cry of distress"² regarding this "urgent matter of survival for Christianity"³ in their book, "The Unity of the Church." Looking at contemporary secularism and atheism, they say such an age cries out for the saving power of Christian truth, but that the fraction of Christianity into various opposing denominations undermines its credibility and efficacy. They rightly observe that a broken church is hard to sell, and it incorrectly suggests a broken faith. Moreover, this disunity is an internal flaw; "the unity of the Church is the commandment of the Lord, who will demand from the leaders of the churches an accounting as to whether or not they have really done everything possible in this matter."⁴ For these reasons, the consolidation of all denominations is a "matter of life or death for Christendom."⁵

Vatican II paid special attention to both ecumenism and intra-religious dialogue, revealing a spirit of *caritas* not only with fellow Christians, but with many various religious traditions. *Nostra Aetate* acknowledges those things other religious traditions hold in common with Catholicism. It states:

In Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry ... Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world... The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God...they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting...The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth,

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Ibid., 1.

nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men...The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and *collaboration* with the followers of other religions to recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.⁶

This should strike all of us! While the Church would and does not abandon its teachings for political reasons, “The Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death ...in order that *all* may reach salvation...(and) We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God.”⁷ This emphasis reveals a theological trend away from the dogmatic and structural debates of the Reformation era and the ushering in of an era of fellowship, cooperation, and emphasis on unity.

Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* states that division “openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the Good News to every creature”⁸ The Decree seems to invoke the oft-cited maxim: in big things, unity; in small things, diversity; and in all things, love. It states later: We “should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith.” Already here, we see an avenue for the discussion of ordained ministry: where does *it* fall along this “hierarchy of truths?”

Similar to *Nostra Aetate*, *Unitatis Redintegratio* looks to Protestant brothers and sisters looking for what we hold in common, and this methodological move is precisely, it argues, the only way ecumenism will happen.

What we see in the ecumenical theology of Vatican II is an emphasis on the dire necessity of visible and ontological unity for the Church to be Church. Indeed – this is the very heart of what it means to say ecclesiology is at the heart of ecumenism, for the Church cannot *be* Church as Christ designed without unity.

Saint John Paul II evidences no less fervor and commitment to nothing short of full communion between divided Christendom in his 1995 *Ut Unum Sint*. He states:

The unity of all divided humanity is the will of God. For this reason he sent his Son, so that by dying and rising for us he might bestow on us the Spirit of love. On the eve of his sacrifice on the Cross, Jesus himself prayed to the Father for his disciples and for all those who believe in him, that they *might be one*, a living communion. This is the basis not only of the duty, but also of the responsibility before God and his plan, which falls to those who through Baptism become members of the Body of Christ, a Body in which the fullness of reconciliation and communion must be made present. How is it possible to remain divided, if we have been “buried” through Baptism in the Lord’s death, in the very act by which God, through the death of his Son, has broken down the walls of division?⁹

To emphasize the importance and necessity of unity is not, of course, to minimize the complexities of navigating a solution to the issue of ordained ministry, the “standstill” about which we’ve already mentioned. That being said, the foregoing reflection is meant to

⁶ Vatican II. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*. 28 October 1965. Vatican. The Holy See. 3, emphasis added.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ Vatican II. Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*. 21 November, 1964. Vatican. The Holy See. 1.

⁹ Vatican II. Encyclical on commitment to Ecumenism *Ut Unum Sint*. 25 May, 1995. Vatican. The Holy See. 6.

compel us to see how urgent it is to come up with creative ways forward nonetheless. And it is with this spirit of creativity, surely, that the Anglicans/Episcopalians and Lutherans embarked on their discussions with each other in the documents I'd now like to survey topically.

The Primary Documents

The guiding question here is: what can the Catholic Church – and certainly – also other divided denominations – take from their discussion? Regarding either method or content (or both), is here, buried in these under-read documents, a pearl of great value?

First, a jointly agreed-upon definition of “full communion” at work in several of these documents. What we are talking about is not the *conflation* of two churches into one, the way Rahner and Fries suggest in their book mentioned above. Rather, it is a relationship between two distinct churches or communions in which each maintains its own autonomy while recognizing the catholicity and apostolicity of the other, and believing the other to hold the essentials of the Christian faith. Central to the definition are being freely able to communicate at the altar of the other, and freedom of ordained ministers to officiate sacramentally in either Church. It also implies transferability of members and freedom to use each other’s liturgies. “Full communion involves a state of mutual recognition short of merger” however priests of each can minister over each other’s sacraments.¹⁰ So it does not imply sameness, but unity in *koinonia*.

Conversations began between the two denominations in Canada in 1969, eventually leading to the 1998 document *Called to Full Communion: A Study Resource for Lutheran-Anglican Relations Including the Waterloo Declaration*.¹¹ It comes from the work done by the Joint Working Group of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada in December of 1997, and officially declares full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada.

In the US, the discussion began in 1970s. The Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. and the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations of the Episcopal Church conversed with each other from 1978-80 to produce *Lutheran – Episcopal Dialogue: Report and Recommendations*¹² (1981). This document represents the earliest published dialogue between the two denominations in the U.S. The 1990s was a fruitful time in the U.S. for Lutheran-Episcopal dialogue. The 1991 document “*Toward Full Communion*” And “*Concordat of Agreement*”: *Lutheran Episcopal Dialogue Series III*,¹³ which reflects dialogue in the between the two denominations in the U.S., and the accompanying *Concordat of Agreement: Supporting Essays*¹⁴ (1995) preceded the 1999

¹⁰ “Anglicans, Lutherans Urge Full Communion: Canadian Lutheran Anglican Dialogue.” *Anglican Journal* 120:8 (Oct 1994). 12.

¹¹ *Called to Full Communion: A Study Resource for Lutheran-Anglican Relations Including the Waterloo Declaration*. The Joint Working Group of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada, December 1997. Toronto, Ontario: Anglican Book Centre, 1998.

¹² *Lutheran – Episcopal Dialogue: Report and Recommendations*. Second Series 1976-1980. Sponsored by the Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. and the Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations of the Episcopal Church. Cincinnati, Forward Movement Publications, 1981.

¹³ “*Toward Full Communion*” And “*Concordat of Agreement*”: *Lutheran Episcopal Dialogue Series III*. Ed. William A. Norgren and William G. Rusch. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991.

¹⁴ *Concordat of Agreement: Supporting Essays*. Ed. Daniel F. Martensen. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995.

document *Called to Common Mission: A Lutheran Proposal for a Revision of the Concordat of Agreement*¹⁵ by just a few short years. It is in this *Called to Common Mission* that the Lutheran Church in the United States confirmed full communion with the Episcopal Church.

In Europe, the major texts include *The Meissen Agreement Texts: On the Way to Visible Unity*¹⁶ (1988) and *Together in Mission and Ministry: The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays*¹⁷ (1993). It is this latter document that declares full communion representative of work between the British and Irish Anglican Churches together with the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches.

These documents above, which come out of individual churches in the U.S., Canada, and Northern Europe, are not the only documents to have emerged throughout these conversations. Additionally, the Lutherans and Anglicans/Episcopalians have produced a couple of international documents not representing one particular country. *The Niagara Report: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcopate 1987*¹⁸ (1988) represents an early international conversation. In 2003, another international dialogue produced *Growth in Communion: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Working Group 2000-2002*¹⁹

Given the short length of this paper and the amount of repetition between documents, we will not, here, repeat information cited across several of the documents. Instead, we will explore items topically and imply that these themes are present across several of the documents from various regions of the world, all of which seem to be in conversation with each other. There is a lot of crossover and very similar themes across the board.

One theme present across the board is that of discovering a hidden brotherhood or familiar ties in each other. Fellow churches see in each other the story of long lost siblings. The idea that continually arises from both sides of the discussion that both Churches have been given by God sufficient faithfulness to the apostolic gospel that today we they can recognize each other as Sister Christians. In particular, both recognize one another as products of the Protestant Reformation. In recognizing the intact proclamation of the Gospel in each other, we observe each denomination agreeing to the following *quite surprising* changes.

The Lutherans agree to all of the following: that the title of bishop is extended to those who exercise office of episcopate (pastoral leadership and spiritual supervision); that rites of installations of bishops is to be revised so there is a laying on of hands by at least three bishops, and only bishops preside at ordinations. Now if this does not seem revolutionary,

¹⁵ *Called to Common Mission: A Lutheran Proposal for a Revision of the Concordat of Agreement. An agreement of Full Communion with the Episcopal Church as amended and Adopted by the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, August 19, 1999.* Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999.

¹⁶ *The Meissen Agreement Texts: On the Way to Visible Unity.* The Council for Christian Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England. Meissen, March 18, 1988. Occasional Paper No. 2.

¹⁷ *Together in Mission and Ministry: The Porvoo Common Statement With Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe. Conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches.* London: Church House Publishing, 1993.

¹⁸ *The Niagara Report: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcopate 1987.* By the Anglican - Lutheran International Continuation Committee. London: Church House Publishing, the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation, 1988.

¹⁹ *Growth in Communion: Report of the Anglican – Lutheran International Working Group 2000-2002.* Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003.

recall that the Lutherans formed around the central idea of the priesthood of all believers, strictly rejecting this kind of attention to hierarchy, or the very acknowledgement of a hierarchy!

In turn, Anglicans agree to the following: To make canonical revisions that recognize the full authenticity of existing ministries of Lutheran Churches, (which doesn't undermine or surrender the gift of the historic episcopate), and regularly invite Lutheran Bishops to participate in the Laying on of Hands for ordinations of Anglican bishops.

Both denominations say that these changes are not meant to imply indifference to the gift and symbol of the historic episcopate.

So we see here that it is not theological moves per se, but a shift in orientation toward the other, a shift from hostility to community, that allows the other to word or conceptualize of one another's ministry with charity needed to accommodate each other.

In fact, each side seems to almost laugh at themselves about the fact that historically, Anglicans considered acceptance of the historic episcopate a precondition for communion, and for Lutherans it is enough to have unity in word and sacrament, and, in fact, insisting on episcopal succession undermines the work of Lutheran ministry:

The frustrating character of the historic disagreement between Anglicans and Lutherans –its sheer folly – can be formulated thus. Anglicans say to Lutherans, If you have no objection in principle to episcopal government, then your refusal to adopt it can only be obstinacy. Lutherans say to Anglicans, of course we can adopt it, provided you Anglicans say it is not necessary for us to do so. To which Anglicans reply, we haven't got any official theology which says that it, the episcopate, is of the essence of the Church, but we couldn't possibly say, dogmatically, that it wasn't. This conversation is not merely frustrating, it is dumb. And our parent bodies ought to demand their money back from us in this consultation if we cannot show a way out of this ludicrous impasse.²⁰

The *Niagara Report* speaks at length about the discovery that Lutherans have a long theological history having a place for bishops, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada having bishops since its inauguration in 1986. Conversely, it highlights the extent to which Anglicans/Episcopalians do value a place for the ministry of all believers.

They further come together in a broadening of the definition of apostolic succession. To de-emphasize the extent to which bishops per se stand in apostolic succession and emphasize, instead, that “to speak of Apostolic succession is to speak primarily of characteristics of the whole Church and recognize a Church as being in the apostolic succession.”²¹ We see here an emphasis on the Church existing because of the unbroken continuity of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Apostolic succession is not, in this emphasis, primarily an unbroken chain of those ordaining to those ordained, but in a succession in the presiding ministry of a church which stands in the continuity of apostolic faith. Conversely, then, the documents point to the fact that Lutherans recognize the sacramentality of ordination, naming that, on occasion in Lutheran confessional documents, the term sacrament is deemed applicable to ordination. “What the Reformers objected to was the idea that succession constitutes a guarantee or criterion of apostolic faithfulness, but once one thinks in terms of the sign value of continuity in office, this

²⁰ “Toward Full Communion,” 21.

²¹ *The Niagara Report*, 53.

difficulty vanishes. Signs strengthen the reality they signify, but the sign can be present without the reality.”²²

To conclude, it seems that a shift in emphasis, more than a change in any theology, allows the Lutheran and Anglican communions to recognize in each other a commonly held apostolic faith. Thus, the issue of ordained ministry need not divide the two churches.

Both denominations seem to be able to make a variety of statements evidencing an agreement on the very nature of ordination. Both agree it is a gift of God from above and not from the congregation from below. Both declare that both Churches already stand in apostolic succession. Both agree that “Scripture and Tradition” are not dual partners in revelation, but that Scripture is ultimately the only source of revelation (which, from a Catholic standpoint, further discussion would surely be needed). Both say that traditions (with a lower case t) should bow to Tradition (with a capital T), and that traditions should never become petrified, instead remaining open for change and renewal. Finally, both say that episcopal succession is a sign but not a guarantee of the continuity and unity of the Church.

The conclusion to all of the good work done by the work which led to these documents is immediate acknowledgement of the full authenticity of each other’s ordained ministries and immediate move to full communion.

What Can We Learn?

It is extraordinary that two communions with such differing theologies of ordination could enter into full communion. If this is possible, and if, as argued above, ordination is at the heart of ecclesiology, which is at the heart of ecumenism, this means great things for other Churches by way of orientation. This is not to say that theological impasses might easily be glossed over. But a change in *emphasis* is quite different than a change in theology. The documents referenced in this paper have creatively and humbly worked through many of the theological disunity on episcopacy to recognize, in each other, ways in which the Gospel is alive and thriving in each other. It seems, then, that a great deal of hope exists for other Christian Churches to approach each other this way.

If the Lutheran Church can accept the existence of bishops and the laying on of hands, and the Anglican Church can declare ways in which they can understand the Lutheran bishops to stand in apostolic succession, surely there is room in the discussion about ordination within all denominations to accommodate each other’s sometimes widely opposing understandings without compromising their own. Now, as a Catholic, I would be remiss if I did not point out that the way the Anglican Church has accepted the Lutheran ministers as belonging to apostolic succession – that is – to say that apostolic succession is more than a succession of ordination from bishops stemming from St. Peter, but also standing in the succession of believers in the Bible such that we are all standing in apostolic succession as Christians, is perhaps painting with a broad brush. A Catholic and an Orthodox would press the discussion forward in a way that makes room for the specifically successive aspect of apostolic succession. Yet, the approach to the topic by both churches is an illuminating and encouraging example of the very *caritas* that needs to be at the heart of ecumenical dialogue if it is to bear any fruit.

²² “Toward Full Communion,” 22.

If the ordained ministry is one of the most significant questions facing ecumenism today, surely the dialogues between Episcopalians/Anglicans and Lutherans in the US, Canada, and Northern Europe are a case study in the kinds of theological and ecumenical gains that can be gained from focused, charitable, and purposeful dialogue about them. We must not see the topic of episcopal succession solely in terms of technicalities and how to satisfy them, but rather in the true spirit of kenosis, charity, and koinonia that truly characterizes communion. For communion to be achieved, communion must be embodied.

May God make it so. I am eager to see, in my own lifetime, the way the theologically central item of episcopal succession is creatively discussed and charitably approached on the avenue to welcome all people into the Christian Church of an era of unity. There is indeed room in ecumenical discourse about central ecclesiological elements such as ordination for a legitimate plurality that does not undermine the essential unity of the Church. The current separation plaguing Christianity today is much more than a legitimate plurality. It is nothing less than a life-threatening division. Thus, ecumenism in general – and ecumenical discussions about ecclesiology – is one of the most important enterprises Christianity can currently involve itself with.

For Further Reading

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