



Questions of Ambiguity and Integrity?

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Until last year you could tell by looking who was a priest whose ministry we could receive, and who was not. But now we have male priests ordained by women bishops. We can't receive their ministry; but how can you tell who ordained whom, for example, when you're a churchwarden arranging cover in a vacancy? One of the reasons why the Bishops invite priests to register as Priests of The Society is to help answer that question. Deacons and ordinands can register as well. They sign a Declaration that commits them to what The Society stands for. Priests and deacons submit their letters of orders to prove they were ordained by a bishop whose orders we can recognize. The relevant Society bishop sends them a Welcome Letter, so they can prove that they are clergy of The Society; and we have begun to issue identity cards to priests...

Colin Podmore, *New Directions*, Vol. 20, No. 257, February 2017, p. 14

What does it mean to have integrity? *Someone* who has integrity acts with honour, probity, good character, principles, virtues, decency, fairness; they are sincere and truthful. *Something* that has integrity is whole, undivided, coherent and together. The very word in the English language, and from the Old French *intégrité*, connotes blamelessness and purity. And more directly from the Latin word *integritatem*, the word connotes soundness, wholeness and completeness.

There is a problem, then, for any church that wants to talk about 'two integrities' co-existing within its life - especially when they are opposed to one another. The Church of England took a decision in 1993 to adopt precisely this position in relation to gender (the infamous Act of Synod), enshrining the rights and affirming those who conscientiously object to women being ordained. In some ways, the situation of the Church of England is analogous to that of the Labour Party's election manifesto of 1983, with its bifurcated policies on nuclear weapons. 'The longest suicide note in history' was how Gerald Kaufman MP described that manifesto, with its inconsistencies and unresolved internal arguments. The Church of England can now match that manifesto on gender and sexuality, pound for pound.

Moreover, the Church of England now has an additional problem in relation to men who are ordained by female bishops. Because some groups - *Forward in Faith* and *The Society* (as it is simply known, but under the patronage of St. Wilfrid and St. Hilda), and who have a recognised 'integrity' in the Church of England - *cannot* recognise the other integrity that affirms the ordination of women as priests and

bishops. The result is that neither side *has* integrity (as a noun: wholeness and completeness, etc.), but both sides believe they are *acting* with integrity (as a verb: decently, and on the basis of sincerely held convictions, etc.)

On the basis of this, I simply state the following:

- That the Bishop of Sheffield-designate (the Rt. Revd. Philip North) should voluntarily withdraw himself from nomination to the See of Sheffield, and that this act would be an act of integrity, consistent with his beliefs, and with his wider concerns for the catholicity of the church, and for the flourishing of pastoral relationships. I do not call for him to do so. Rather, I invite him to reflect on his position, and work through his theological convictions with honesty and sincerity; in other words, act with integrity.

To the best of my knowledge, I have never met Bishop Philip North. So this article is not in any way personal. I hear excellent things about the quality of his ministry, and the gifts and passions he brings to ordained ministry - as a deacon, priest, and more recently, as Bishop of Burnley. There can be no question that Philip North has gifts that make him suited for episcopal ministry.

But there is a world of difference between being an Area or suffragan Bishop, and a Diocesan. Not least, because as the diocesan bishop, the 'cure of souls' is legally and sacramentally shared with *all* clergy-colleagues. So, the Bishop needs to be *fully confident* that the priests they share in this ministry with are pastorally competent, theologically sound, and crucially, that their ordination is valid and affirmed, such that their sacramental ministry (again, shared), is efficacious.

As a member of The Society's Council of Bishops, Philip North cannot and does not believe this to be true of two categories of clergy: first, women; and second, any man ordained by a female bishop. This statement from Dr Colin Podmore, Director of Forward in Faith and Secretary of the Council of Bishops of The Society in 2016 could not be clearer: 'we *can't* receive their ministry'.* Moreover, this is not a careless slip of the pen or tongue from a Director who is a layperson, as Dr Podmore helpfully states in the same article, that, 'like a church, The Society is led by bishops. It is not a democracy'. Philip North is one of those bishops, and so co-leads The Society.

A concern for order and unity in the church is undoubtedly what drives many opposing the ordination of women. But a concern for order and unity in all creation – no less Godly – is as vital for our church and world. The church lives constantly in the tension between the glacial patience of catholicity, and that of proactive, faithful reform. On the one hand, it is bound to remain true to its given nature. On the other

* http://www.forwardinfaith.com/uploads/16_11_The_Society_and_FiF.pdf accessed 24/02/17

hand, it is bound to reform and change in each generation, as the Holy Spirit renews the church.

The question of integrity then, is this. Should anyone accept a nomination to be a diocesan bishop, when this same person cannot recognise and affirm the sacramental validity of a significant percentage of their own clergy who would be in their care, and with whom they will have to share in the 'cure of souls'. I think the answer to this must be 'no', and unequivocally so. Any position of integrity would refuse such an invitation and nomination.

It is a matter of integrity because, by definition, the diocesan bishop has to be able to affirm the wholeness, undivided coherence and togetherness of the ministry of the clergy in their own Diocese. But how could you be an Area or suffragan Bishop, and hold views such as those held by The Society? Because, I think, you can, as a matter of integrity, be a Bishop who ministers to those congregations and clergy that hold such views, offering your ministry as *part* of a whole. That would not compromise their sense of catholicity. And it's precisely for this reason that Philip North did, in good conscience, acting with integrity, request to be consecrated by male bishops alone.

Bishop Philip recently met the women clergy of Sheffield, and it was by all accounts a cordial gathering. While he is unable in conscience to ordain women, Bishop Philip made it clear that he was not opposed women's leadership. Indeed he has stated that he is in favour of it and would actively promote it. (This is also interesting, because it places him at odds with some of the Conservative Evangelicals who lobbied for his nomination). Bishop Philip was clear that the women are, if so ordained, legally and canonically priests or bishops.

But the crucial question is, what does Bishop Philip think is happening at the altar, when a woman is presiding at the Eucharist. I don't know. And so far, Bishop Philip has tended to be ambiguous in his statements on this matter. But this issue cannot now be fudged. Any answer that sidestepped the question as to whether such a sacramental offering is valid or efficacious would be pastorally and personally undermining of women clergy. And to repeat, the position of The Society is that 'we can't receive [this] ministry'.

Bishop Philip faces a clear choice here. He can distance himself from and essentially disown the official view of The Society - that the sacramental ministry of women, and men ordained by female bishops - cannot be received. This would presumably mean him leaving The Society. Or, he can fully own the official position of The Society, in which case his clergy are in a most difficult place, with a diocesan bishop effectively

not recognising many of their sacramental ministries. What you can't have is both a fudge *and* integrity.

In all this, no-one has yet cottoned on that male clergy ordained by a female bishop also pose significant problems and impediments to The Society, as Colin Podmore so clearly articulates. And The Society is episcopally-led, as Colin Podmore so helpfully clarifies. Women are not recognised as 'real' priests or bishops; men ordained by female bishops are therefore not to be regarded as 'proper' priests either.

To place this in context, I recall a conversation fifteen years ago with a diocesan bishop who was implacably opposed to the ordination of women. (The conversation resonates with the quotation from Colin Podmore). I asked the diocesan bishop about the wider implications of having women bishops in the Anglican Communion.

What would he do, say, with a male priest who had been faithfully offering priestly ministry overseas for many years, but was ordained by a woman bishop? And if that same priest now asked him for permission to officiate in his diocese when he returned home to England. Would he grant them a licence? No, he said. Would he insist on some sort of conditional re-ordination? No, he said. Then what, I asked, would he do. He replied, simply, that he would ordain them. That there was no question about this. The man was not a priest: and he never had been. No women could be ordained; and no woman could ordain a man or a woman. Women could not be priests, and they could not be bishops. End of story.

There is a further problem here. A priest ordained by a woman bishop in one diocese in the Church of England can't now easily move across to another diocese, if that diocesan bishop, as a matter of their 'integrity', holds that women cannot ordain. At this point, integrity breaks down: the very *integration* of the Church of England unravels, as two theologically viewpoints, now diametrically opposed, will not be able to agree on the ordained-sacramental status of such clergy.

And there is a further problem, clearly alluded to in Colin Podmore's earlier quote: identity cards and registration. Priests will need to 'prove' they were ordained by a male bishop. And presumably in more extreme cases, establish that their ordaining bishop has never ordained a woman. But travel forward, if you will, a century from now. Those identity cards will eventually need to become lengthy records of 'ontological genealogy'. To be a priest in The Society, you'll need to show that the bishop who ordained you, was, in turn, ordained by someone pure and efficacious, and in turn, was ordained likewise - stretching all the way back to our present time. The 'ontological genealogy' will have to demonstrate an unbroken chain of purity, and be a 'taint free' litany of bishops. This is sacralised sexism.

Thus, the current 'system' - effectively an attempt at a political compromise that is manifestly out of its depth within a complex theological dichotomy - actually makes it impossible for any diocesan bishop who holds such views on women priests and women bishops to act with any real integrity. Such bishops cannot regard such men or women who are ordained by a woman bishop as 'real' priests. So how can the Church of England move forward here?

Yves Congar, the renowned French Roman Catholic theologian, addressed the subject of true and false reform in the church (1950; translated in 1962).[†] Congar believed in unity. But he was also realistic about the differences, diversity and disagreements that caused divisions. Congar discussed the virtue of patience. He understood that hopeful patience may prove to be wise for some while to achieve unity, but pointless waiting is merely prevarication posturing as discernment.

I am conscious that at the heart of this lies a deep dynamic of Anglo-Catholic identity, and one perceptively excavated and explained in the sociological writings of W.S.F. Pickering: namely, ambiguity.[‡] Moreover, multiple ambiguities: on Roman Catholicism; culture and aesthetics; and a tendency be sectarian-like in organisation. In more recent times, sexuality and gender have also placed this investment in ambiguity under severe stress. The nettle that needs grasping here is that ambiguity, whilst it may have an inner ecclesial logic within Anglo-Catholicism, means others pay the price for this, as their identities and roles are left uncertain and unresolved by such proclivities. This is pastorally demoralising for them, to say the least.

As a national church, we seem to have been quite slow in learning that diversity, disagreement and differences cannot simply be managed into consensus. The political, synodical or managerial solutions that have been proffered so far have singularly failed to inspire and galvanise most of the debaters. In our attempts to organize the church and manage its diversity, we are often guilty of trying to 'give unto thy servants that peace which the world cannot give' to ourselves. But it is a gift of the Spirit, grafted through conversation, conflict and slow consensus that gradually build us into the communion God intends us to be.

If diversity could have been easily managed, the New Testament would perhaps have given us some pointers; and the Apostles and Early Church Fathers might then have led the way. But alas, it is something of a conceit of modern times to suppose that the church is an organization in which diversity can be ironed out; difficulties managed; and the church homogenized into a discourse of uniform clarity for the

[†] Yves Congar, *Vraie et Fausse Réforme dans L'Eglise*, (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1950).

[‡] W. S. F. Pickering, *Anglo-Catholicism: A Study in Religious Ambiguity* (London: SPCK, 1989).

media and the public at large. The church is a body that seeks unity in the midst of diversity; it does not aspire to being an ecology of managed uniformity.

Then there is the other question of integrity: can a diocesan bishop who does not believe his women clergy are really priests actually support and affirm them in their ministry. It depends, I think, on the nature of the diocese. Area bishops can ensure such support is in place, if the diocesan bishop cannot provide it. But in a smaller diocese, where the diocesan bishop may only have a suffragan, the position of the women clergy becomes more tentative, and even perilous.

And this, alas, is the position that the clergywomen and clergymen of Sheffield now find themselves in - namely, with a bishop as focus of unity, but who cannot in his own conscience affirm the whole. So he cannot minister with integrity; because he does not believe his own clergy share this integrity. This is why the only way forward is, alas, for Philip North to decline his nomination. It is the price for his integrity that only he can pay. If your own diocesan bishop doesn't think your sacramental ministry as a woman and a priest is actually efficacious, then your integrity comes under real pressure.

Clearly, major theological differences have to be resolved if priests and bishops are to be in true communion. So if these differences can't be resolved, then the virtue and practice of integrity suggests some new paths: acquiescence or withdrawal. Either the bishop has to step aside and step down from exercising episcopal ministry at this level and in this context. Or, the women have to resign, as their own bishop does not recognise and affirm their sacramental efficacy.

In the recent and excellent *WATCH Report on the Developments in Women's Ministry in 2016*,[§] the authors point out how much of the progress of the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century is now being reversed. Few women under the age of 40 are offering for ordination. Women are increasingly to be found in NSM roles. In London, Chichester, Winchester and Blackburn, 15% or fewer of the incumbents are female. Thirteen dioceses report no women on their senior staff; twenty-two report only one woman on their senior staff team. Small wonder the number of women under the age offering for ordination of 40 is declining.

The only way forward out of this binary is for the church to be, as the Apostle once opined, 'transformed by the renewal of our minds' (Romans 12:2). The word 'renewal' can be taken in at least three senses: a recovery of something lost;

[§] <http://womenandthechurch.org/news/watch-launches-report-developments-womens-ministry-2016/> accessed 23/02/17

improvement of what is in the present; or a complete exchange of the past and present for a new future.

The renewal the Church of England both seeks and needs is the urgent task here. For this, we need outstanding theological leadership, and not a mere suite of fudged and managed compromises. But above all else we need both to act with integrity, and preserve our integrity. Diocesan bishops need to enable this, offering their faithful, full and flourishing ministry, unequivocally, and without reserve, to the *whole* church, to *all* its ministers, and to the wider world.

To be authentically ‘catholic’ in the Church of England is to fully committed to its’ validity. To be a member of The Society is, by definition, to be *conditionally* and only *partially* committed to the validity of this same church. For that reason, you cannot have diocesan bishops who are, for reasons of their own conscience, unable to recognise and receive the ordination of clergy within their own Diocese.

The next step for the See of Sheffield is an issue of profound integrity. And for the Church of England, there is the dawning realisation that trying to contain ‘two integrities’ in one body is a near-impossible feat. Far from being a clever oxymoron (i.e. juxtaposing elements that appear to be contradictory, but which contain some deeper, unifying point), or being mutually gracious and respectful across divisions, or pointing to some deeper spiritual paradox, ‘two integrities’ is neither credible nor desirable. As the Church of England has begun to discover in our debates on sexuality, if you truly want to be one church, you can only really afford one integrity.

MWP, February 2017