

Gregorian crozier head at Anglican meeting- A once and future hope



The ancient Camaldolese Benedictine monastery of San Gregorio al Celio in Rome is the place where St Augustine of Canterbury served as Prior, before being sent to Kent in England to convert the Anglo-Saxons there in 595 ad. St Augustine became the first Archbishop of Canterbury in 597. The monastery of San Gregorio is also the home of the crozier head venerated as that of St Gregory the Great, the Pope who sent St Augustine on his mission.

Thanks to the initiative of Fr Robert McCulloch, Procurator General of the Society of St Columban, with the support of Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi of the Pontifical Council for Culture, I, along with Fr Robert, my associate Fr Marcus Walker, and Mr Steven Townsend of the British Embassy to the Holy See, recently approached Prior George Nelliyanil of San Gregorio with a request that he loan the crozier head to the Archbishop of Canterbury for the global Anglican Primates' meeting at Canterbury this past January.

The monastery has also seen Popes and Anglican Archbishops of Canterbury pray together in recent years and graciously agreed to the loan from its archives, to be generously cared for by the dean of Canterbury Cathedral, the Very Rev'd Dr Robert Willis.

The loan of the crozier head was a sign of the prayerful interest in and sense of solidarity that many members of the Catholic community have for the work of the Anglican Primates' meeting, which was held to deepen the mutual understanding and unity was sought within the Anglican Communion.

We came knowing that the 2016 Primates' meeting would concern the differences among us in regard to our teaching on matters of human sexuality. The unanimous decision of the Primates was to walk together, however painful this is, and despite our differences, as a deep expression of our unity in the body of Christ. We looked at what that meant in practical terms, and addressed what consequences follow for The Episcopal Church in relation to the Anglican Communion following its recent change of marriage doctrine (by removing gender specific language).

The recommendations made at the meeting included: the "unanimous desire to walk together".

However given the seriousness of these matters the Primates formally acknowledged this distance “by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity”.

The Primates also asked that the Archbishop of Canterbury “appoint a Task Group to maintain conversation among ourselves with the intention of restoration of relationship, the rebuilding of mutual trust, healing the legacy of hurt, recognising the extent of our commonality and exploring our deep differences, ensuring they are held between us in the love and grace of Christ”.

All recommendations were adopted by the majority of the Primates present. In fact at the meeting we pledged to develop this process so that it can also be applied when any unilateral decisions on matters of doctrine and polity are taken that threaten our unity.

The Primates condemned homophobic prejudice and violence and resolved to work together to offer pastoral care and loving service irrespective of sexual orientation. This conviction arises out of our discipleship of Jesus Christ. They reaffirmed their rejection of criminal sanctions against same-sex attracted people. They also recognised that the Christian church and within it the Anglican Communion have often acted in a way towards people on the basis of their sexual orientation that has caused deep hurt. Where this has happened they express their profound sorrow and affirm again that God’s love for every human being is the same, regardless of their sexuality, and that the church should never by its actions give any other impression.

In the wake of the climate change conference in Paris, the meeting heard about a petition of almost two million signatures co-coordinated by the Anglican Environment Network. Reports were made about moves to divest from fossil fuels, the expansion of the African Deserts and the struggle for survival of the peoples of the Pacific, as island life is threatened in many places by the rise of sea levels.

The meeting discussed the reality of religiously motivated violence and its impact on people and communities throughout the world. The Anglican Primates repudiated any religiously motivated violence and expressed solidarity with all who suffer from this evil in the world today.

The Primates also joyfully committed “themselves and the Anglican Church, to proclaim throughout the world the person and work of Jesus Christ, unceasingly and authentically, inviting all to embrace the beauty and joy of the Gospel”. They discussed tribalism, ethnicity, nationalism and patronage networks, and the deep evil of corruption. They reflected that these issues become inextricably connected to war and violence, and derive from poverty.

At the meeting a debt of gratitude was expressed to the Community of St Gregory for the loan of the crozier head to sit alongside the St Augustine Gospels.

The ancient link between Rome and Canterbury continues to exist albeit in a very different form. We all pray and long for the day when our shared mission is consolidated and empowered by the unity in ministry that Pope St Gregory and St Augustine enjoyed in the sixth century, which through the Archbishopric of Canterbury, contributed so creatively to the evangelisation of Britain.

Thinking of Popes, Archbishops of Canterbury and crozier heads, at the final liturgy for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January, in the Papal Basilica of St Paul's Outside-the-Walls, Archbishop Gennadios Zervos, the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch and myself the representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, were invited by His Holiness Pope Francis to walk side by side in the procession, and to share in the giving of the Pontifical Blessing. Walking together, talking together, blessing together, we move forward.

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