

Why unity matters - The Tablet Interview



Justin Welby talked to Julie Etchingham during his latest visit to Rome about what links and what divides the Catholic Church and the Anglican Community

IT HAS BEEN a whirlwind 48 hours in Rome, and Archbishop Justin Welby seems thoroughly invigorated by it. Fresh from private discussions with Pope Francis, and a Mass celebrated in St Peter's, we meet in the very British surroundings of Villa Wolkonsky, residence of the UK ambassador to Italy, to talk about both the joys and the pains of the historic visit. On his right hand is the glittering ring given 50 years ago by Pope Paul VI to Michael Ramsey, one of Justin Welby's predecessors as Archbishop of Canterbury, to seal a turning point in the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion. It is a large, square, green stone divided by a gold cross and studded with four diamonds – rather unwieldy on Archbishop Welby's slim right hand, and you occasionally catch him turning it in his fingers.

There is little doubt that the personal connection between Welby and Pope Francis is a key driving force in these renewed efforts for Christian unity. Those of us who saw the pair before they spent time in private conversation witnessed them roaring with laughter at a shared joke. So what insight can the archbishop offer into their friendship? "It's very personal – obviously not private because it's too official – but it is very warm and there's a lot of joking. At every conversation I seek his advice on something – because he's very wise and very experienced. He has a breadth of view that I can't get close to, and a depth of thinking, a spirituality which is profoundly moving – so I will sometimes seek his advice in personal terms – and sometimes in the things that we do."

The two had just signed a Common Declaration charting the next steps towards unity – with the practical outward sign of commissioning 19 pairs of bishops from the Anglican Communion and Roman Catholic Church to work together in the world on issues such as poverty and injustice. But Archbishop Welby acknowledges – as in the declaration – that because of issues such as women's ordination and human sexuality, full union between the Churches seems a distant dream. "Oh absolutely – yes it really is. Women's ordination particularly is a major blockage.

And there are other things around authority and some dogmatic doctrinal problems too, things of significant importance." Nowhere are they more manifest than at the altar rail. Just that morning in St Peter's, at a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Koch, this was driven home starkly, as Catholics received Holy Communion while Anglicans could not. It is a source of sorrow for the archbishop. "We live with

this, and every single day we feel the pain. And that is good – because the moment these wounds stop hurting, we have really lost the plot. They stop hurting when we are dead, and we are emphatically not dead.”

SUCH DIVISIONS and the profound hope of one day overcoming them can make such encounters in Rome deeply emotional, as happened at the Church of San Gregorio al Celio on Wednesday evening at vespers. “That moment ... when Pope Francis handed me the gift of the bishop’s staff and I took off my cross of nails and gave it to him – and he kissed it and put it over his head – I could see the faces of really pretty tough bishops and archbishops all round with tears pouring down their cheeks. It spoke about a functional, relational unity which is completely different from the dysfunction we suffer in many areas.”

Archbishop Welby again and again underlines that, despite the obstacles to unity, much can still be achieved. “There is institutional unity and what you might call operational working unity. It’s easy to play up the differences – they are profound and very real, but it’s easy to forget the extra - ordinary unity which has developed over the last half century.”

But what of his own Anglican Communion? What hope can there be of union with the Catholic Church when his own institution is so riven with disagreement? Is it easier to come to Rome than face the reality of his own Church? He laughs loudly. “It’s a reasonable question. Funnily enough I think the reason Anglicans appear so riven is that we tend to do our arguing very loudly and in public. The synod of bishops showed some pretty severe signs of tension within the Catholic Church – it’s just that they tend to do their arguing more quietly behind closed doors. We go into the back garden and shout at each other – it’s more ‘out there’. It doesn’t mean it’s more profound – we struggle with walking together, but we are doing it. “The Anglican Communion is in 165 countries – 70 to 80 million people – everything from people in the mountains of Papua New Guinea, through to Manhattan and San Francisco. The idea that you would look at the world in the same way is ridiculous. What is extraordinary is not the depth of division, but the depth of the unity. Talk about climate change, talk about prayer, talk about worship and service to the poor – talk about meeting Jesus Christ, and you find people come together like rock.”

In their audience together, Pope Francis alluded to the discussions the pair had had on conflict and war. He spoke of a world “thirsting for peace”, with the horror of Aleppo unfolding as we spoke.

“What is being done is evil, both in the strict theological sense and in the general sense. It is demonic. It is the absolute contempt for the human spirit. For the dignity of the human being. It is the brushing aside of the poor and the weak and the fragile in a way that is as bad as anything we’ve seen in the last century.”

So in a time when the world faces such bleakness, why should the world care about the nuance of what is happening here in Rome between the Churches?

“I think those who care about justice in the world, about holiness, about the protection of the weak and about mercy – should care. “If you’re a Christian you believe that Jesus said that when we are working together and we are at one, the work of God in the world is transformed – and is so much more effective. This is not about human politics, it’s about making space in our world, in our politics, in our

trade and in our economies, for mercy, grace and love. That's why it matters."

AND WHAT OF his own faith? A man with a Roman Catholic monk as a spiritual director, with a clear personal closeness to Pope Francis – has he ever contemplated a conversion to Roman Catholicism? "Well I certainly wouldn't tell you if I had!" he laughs. But for him there is a clear and personal dividing line. "We differ very profoundly between Catholics and Anglicans – particularly around the ordination of women which is something I feel very strongly about. I was very involved in the end of the process of enabling the ordination of women to the Episcopate as bishops. That's something that I think is right and proper theologically on Christian terms, and we disagree on that. "But if we ever reached a point where the two Churches in my lifetime were able to have visible unity and had reached agreement on these issues where it was not a compromise on some of the things that they feel are essential and that we feel are essential – if there was that great spirit-led moment of unity – it would be probably the greatest moment I could imagine."

A moment when you could be at one with the Roman Catholic Church? "We would all be part of that One Church," he smiles. Meanwhile, Pope Francis' words to him that morning will doubtless sustain his efforts. "He kept emphasising that we will walk together. We will deal with the problems over time – some of them are huge problems which we don't see a way forward on at the moment. But the emphasis was: we will walk together."

Julie Etchingam is presenter of ITV News at Ten.

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