

Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue: Part I

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By Msgr. Raymond A. Barton
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**"Dialogue is not
simply an
exchange of ideas.**

**In some way,
it is always an
'exchange' of gifts."**



Pope John Paul II

One of the yet-to-be realized goals of Vatican II, established by Pope John XXIII in convening the Second Vatican Council, is the Catholic Church's full communion with those churches and ecclesial communities with whom an imperfect communion was already shared.

Just as families from differing backgrounds and cultures, who have their own lives and traditions, prepare for the marriage of their children, the Catholic Church and those united to us through baptism approach each other with respect, recognition and dialogue.

Those same elements, which guide and facilitate the approaching marriage and the future lives of families involved, are being employed in the process of re-discovering the unity of the Church. The experience of implementing this process has been abundantly fruitful and substantive.

Anglicans' and Catholics' First Steps

When Pope Paul VI met with Archbishop Michael Ramsey in March, 1966, he was only the second Pope ever to meet with an Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury since the Reformation. At the conclusion of that fraternal meeting, it is reported that Paul VI took off his episcopal ring and gave it to the Archbishop.

Archbishop Ramsey reciprocated by giving his episcopal ring to the Pope. This is one of two highly symbolic gestures involving Paul VI's sense of respect for other Christian traditions and his desire for reconciliation. His second gesture was made toward the Orthodox Christians.

The outgrowth of the meeting between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury prompted both church leaders to inaugurate an ongoing dialogue between the two Communions. The beginning of this dialogue process was known as the Joint Preparatory Commission (1967–1968). The commission's meetings were focused on three themes: First Steps Toward Restoring Full Unity; Identifying Themes for Dialogue (January 1967); The Authority of the Word of God and Its Relationship to the Church (September 1967); and A Vision for Unity (December 1967), which was later issued as the Malta Report.



Pope John Paul II with Anglican and other Roman Catholic leaders at the Vatican.

With the work of the Preparatory Commission in place, Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Ramsey then established the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), whose substantive work currently continues.

The Final Report

The crowning jewel of ARCIC's first phase (1970-1981) is The Final Report, issued in 1981. The report incorporated not only the agreed statements previously submitted on Eucharist, Ministry (lay and ordained), and Authority — but also the "Elucidations" based upon observations made by various sectors within the two Communion.

Each Communion officially received the Final Report and later issued an official response through the appropriate channels: the Provinces of the Anglican Communion and the Vatican.

The Eucharist

Employing biblical and patristic language and avoiding the polemic language of the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras, the Final Report enables each tradition to recognize its own faith as it developed through the ages.

For example, regarding the doctrine on Eucharist, the report stated: "We believe that we have reached substantial agreement on the doctrine of the Eucharist. Although we are all conditioned by the traditional ways in which we have expressed and practiced our Eucharistic faith, we are convinced that if there are any remaining points of disagreement they can be resolved on the principles here established.

"We acknowledge a variety of theological approaches within both our communions. But, we have seen it as our task to find a way of advancing together beyond the doctrinal disagreements of the past. It is our hope that in view of the agreement which we have reached on Eucharistic faith, this doctrine will no longer constitute an obstacle to the unity we seek (#12)."

Intimately connected to the doctrine of Eucharistic faith are the Sacrament of Holy Orders (Bishop, Priest, and Deacon) and the ministry of the laity. The text of the Agreed Statement on Ministry again allows each tradition to recognize its own faith. While the agreement answers the question, "what is ministry/ordination?", it does not address the question "who can be ordained?" That answer would arise in the context of authority, the third facet of the gem, the Final Report.

(Msgr. Raymond A. Barton is the diocese's Vicar for Ecumenism and Interreligious Affairs.)