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The official commission for dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches has published its first document in 13 years, focusing on how each global institution can learn from the other in balancing exercise of ecclesial authority at the local, regional and worldwide levels.

Among the considerations in the 68-page report, released July 2, are questions of how the Catholic Church might learn from the Anglican experience to empower local church leaders to act more independently from Rome at times, and to give more governing authority to consultative bodies such as the Synod of Bishops.

"The Roman Catholic Church can learn from the culture of open and frank debate that exists at all levels of the Anglican Communion," the members of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission state in one of the conclusions of their document, titled: "Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church — Local, Regional, Universal."

"The Anglican practice of granting a deliberative role to synods and of investing authority in regional instruments of communion indicates that the Synod of Bishops could be granted a deliberative role and further suggests the need for the Roman

Catholic Church to articulate more clearly the authority of episcopal conferences," the document continues.

It adds that the Catholic Church can also "fruitfully learn from the inclusion of laity in decision-making structures at every level of Anglican life."

Set up following the historic 1966 meeting between Pope Paul VI and Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, the dialogue commission began its work in 1970 and released its first document a year later on the two churches' understandings of Eucharistic doctrine.

It has written on a wide range of issues since, including how the churches consider issues of ordination, authority and salvation. Its published its last document, "Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ," in 2005 but was on hiatus from then until 2010 after Pope John Paul II protested the appointment of New Hampshire Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson, an openly gay man then in a relationship.

The new document, which was agreed to at a meeting in Erfurt, Germany, in 2017 but quietly posted online the morning of July 2, is part of what the commission considers its third phase of work.

The co-chairs of the group — Birmingham, England Catholic Archbishop Bernard Longley and New Zealand Anglican Archbishop David Moxon, who just finished his term as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Representative to the Holy See — say in a preface that this phase is meant to reconsider two abiding themes of the dialogue: authority and ecclesiology of communion.

Longley and Moxon explain that the document examines the structures each church uses to maintain its global communion to see "how well these instruments … serve us and maintain the unity in diversity that communion implies."

"This task requires frank assessment: the courage to look at ourselves honestly and to learn from the other," they state.

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Comparing decision-making structures, communion

The document, which the commission says is meant for discussion and is not an "authoritative declaration" of either church, is divided into six chapters, with three of the chapters examining one-by-one how each church exercises authority at the local, regional and worldwide levels.

A major focus throughout that examination is on how the two churches balance decision-making between the local and universal levels in different ways.

In one example, the document mentions that in the Anglican Communion local provinces are able to make decisions about sharing the Eucharist with other churches in their province, unlike in the Catholic Church, where such decisions would be reserved for Rome to make for the whole church at large.

"This difference between our two traditions goes to the heart of a difference of understanding and structure between the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Anglican Communion," the report states.

"In part this relates to different understandings as to how the Church moves forward in unity, mission, and truth," it continues. "At issue is the balance between responsiveness to the demands of specific contexts and the need to move together."

The document also examines tensions in the practice of communion within each church, sometimes presenting the Anglican and Catholic perspectives in separate columns so it is clear when each church is speaking specifically about its own experience.

The tensions identified by the Catholic members of the commission are wide-ranging. One "area of difficulty" mentioned is the concept that the world's Catholic bishops can act in an authoritative manner together even when they are not gathered at a council.

"In Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, appeal is made to such binding teaching," the Catholic members of the commission write, referring to the 1994 reaffirmation of the ban on the priestly ordination of women in the Catholic Church and the 1995 document that dealt with issues such as abortion and euthanasia.

"However, there was no act marking the explicit consent of the bishops to this supposed binding teaching," they continue. "As a result, neither the bishops nor the

laity can recognize which teachings require assent until they are proclaimed as binding, either by the Pope … or by an ecumenical council."

The Catholic members of the commission also discuss the powers popes have exercised in recent decades, saying that their use of such authority "can … seem to be at too great a remove from the pastoral reality of the individual local churches."

"Pope Francis has noted a tendency of bishops to defer too readily to Rome rather than to exercise their own proper authority," they state. "The decision-making authority exercised by Rome (particularly in relation to episcopal appointments), and its power to censure, can render both individual bishops and episcopal conferences reticent and constrained in exercising their proper authority."

Later, the Catholic members consider how their church's "instinct for unity and participation in the greater whole" can sometimes lead to an assumption that "the entire Church always needs to move as one on all things, with the consequence that even legitimate cultural and regional differences are suppressed."

"While there are acknowledged tensions within the Anglican Communion, the Roman Catholic Church might fruitfully learn from the Anglican practice of provincial diversity and the associated recognition that on some matters different parts of the Communion can appropriately make different discernments influenced by cultural and contextual appropriateness," they write.

Examining Catholic Church's unity

For their part, the Anglican members praise what they call "the commitment to unity" in the Catholic Church and suggest their communion might emulate Catholic practices of keeping a common calendar of saints, developing a worldwide catechism of teachings, and having a single, uniform Code of Canon Law.

"Despite Anglican hesitancy to modify provincial autonomy, there is a desire for a worldwide identity and commitment that requires deeper expression in the life of the Communion," they state.

The Anglican members also praise the process of the 2014 and 2015 Catholic Synods of Bishops on questions of family life, saying the worldwide meetings of Catholic prelates that resulted in the 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* were "carefully observed" by Anglicans.

They state that Francis' "encouragement of subsidiarity in the determination of divisive pastoral issues could well be … an area of receptive learning."

The Catholic members then acknowledge that Anglican models "could be drawn upon in order to move the Synod from being a purely consultative body to being a deliberative body, which is foreseen in the Code of Canon Law."

In its conclusion, the commission again states that both the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church can learn from one another's experience.

"We believe that Anglicans can learn from Roman Catholic structures and procedures which have developed in the service of unity at the trans-local and universal levels," they state.

"We also believe that Catholics can learn from Anglican structures and procedures which have developed to ensure consultation and deliberation at the local and trans-local levels," they continue.

"In both cases there needs to be a richer understanding of the role of the laity as those who through their baptism participate fully in the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king," they state.

Beyond its co-chairs, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission has 16 members, eight coming from each tradition.

Included among the Catholic members are: Boston Auxiliary Bishop Arthur Kennedy; San Francisco Auxiliary Bishop Robert Christian; and Society of the Holy Child Jesus Sr. Teresa Okure, a theologian at the Catholic Institute of West Africa.

Included among the Anglican members are: Huron, Canada Bishop Linda Nicholls; Mthatha, South Africa Bishop Nkosinathi Ndwandwe; and the Rev. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, a theologian at Trinity Theological College in Singapore.

The group says its next discussions will focus on how the two churches discern right ethical teaching.

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