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The crisis in Anglicanism

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

The Anglican Communion and the Catholic church (of which the *Roman* Catholic church is by far the largest portion) historically have had much to learn from one another.

Anglicans have shown Catholics that it is possible to maintain international unity while respecting local autonomy, and Catholics have shown Anglicans the benefits of a strong central authority.

Ever since 2003, however, when Canon V. Gene Robinson, an openly partnered gay, was elected and consecrated as the incoming Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, the worldwide Anglican Communion has been in turmoil.

It is no longer clear within Anglicanism that international unity is entirely consistent with regard for local autonomy, particularly the autonomy of The Episcopal Church in the United States, which supported -- and continues to support -- Bishop Robinson's controversial ordination.

One of Anglicanism's highest-ranking leaders is now raising that very question. In an address on April 16 at a meeting of the moderately conservative Anglican Communion Institute in Houston, Texas, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George L. Carey, noted that the delicate balance between the requirements of unity and those of local autonomy has generally worked within Anglicanism -- until 2003.

He reminded his audience that the first serious pressure against unity, or interdependence, in recent years arose from the controversy over the ordination of women to the priesthood. At the 1988 Lambeth Conference (a meeting of all the Anglican bishops from around the world, held every ten years), the then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, stressed interdependence over autonomy.

While acknowledging the validity of Anglicanism's traditional valuing of "dispersed authority" in order to avoid the pitfalls of centralism and the development of an "alternative papacy," he warned against an authority that is "dispersed to the point of dissolution and ineffectiveness."

He said to his fellow bishops at the end of his talk: "I believe the choice between independence and interdependence ... is quite simply the choice between unity or gradual fragmentation."

And yet the Anglican Communion, Archbishop Carey noted in his own talk in Houston, had been moving from provincial autonomy to closer interdependence for well over a century, backed by repeated resolutions of the Lambeth Conference.

"It is only since 2003," Carey observed, "that this interdependence and mutuality has seriously been questioned."

Moreover, he insisted, provincial autonomy is "not a theological principle in and of itself," and is "not congruent with New Testament ecclesiology, but merely a by-product of the early modern-era in which the nation-state was emerging at exactly the same moment as the Reformation."

As valuable as provincial autonomy might be, Lord Carey argued, it is not the goal of the Church. Unity and mission are goals, not separation and fragmentation.

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The basic theological problem, he said, is one of authority.

He pointed to what he called "an historically unprecedented" fact that over 300 bishops absented themselves from the most recent Lambeth Conference. "We should not underestimate the significance of such absenteeism," he continued. It was caused, he did not have to remind his audience, by the election and consecration of Gene Robinson in 2003.

He then zeroed in on the Episcopal church in the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada, which have been pressing for "total autonomy theologically from the Communion, while at the same time they impose total canonical autocracy within their dioceses."

He charged that "a system of Prince Bishops has arisen [in North America] who appear to have unfettered control over their (rapidly diminishing) flocks, from which all who dissent from the regnant liberalism are being driven out."

The ordination of Gene Robinson in 2003, against the strong advice of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the moral authority of Lambeth '98, and the appeals of the Primates' Meeting, "has led the Anglican Communion into the worst crisis it has ever faced, and from which it is unlikely to recover."

Archbishop Carey concluded his blunt address with a question for [the Episcopal church]'s House of Bishops and General Convention: "Can conservative believers be assured that they have a future place in [the Episcopal church] without censure or opposition?"

"If the General Convention pursues its liberal agenda in authorizing same-sex liturgies and the ordination of homosexual and lesbian bishops and priests," Lord Carey declared, "this will confirm the fears of many that [the Episcopal church] considers that agenda far more important than the unity of our Communion."

It is clear nevertheless that we still have much to learn from one another. We Catholics can remind our Anglican brothers and sisters of some of the pitfalls of a strong central authority.

But this latest and most severe crisis within Anglicanism is also a sobering reminder to Catholics that local autonomy has pitfalls of its own.

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