

*There has been significant discussion since St John Paul II issued Ut unum sint in 1995, his encyclical calling for a re-examination of the function of the Bishop of Rome beyond Italy (where he is undisputedly the historic Primate of Italy) and the resulting new emphasis of the Vatican on the conciliar (a General or Ecumenical Council of the world's Bishops) authority with the Bishop of Rome as coordinator and spokesman as being the proper and authentic Magisterium (teaching authority) of the Universal Church (a position fully consistent and congruent with historic Anglican teaching).*

*This is the latest development in that theological "re-visioning" which, while a Roman Catholic/Eastern Orthodox ecumenical agreement, has enormous ramifications for the Anglican/Roman Catholic official theological discussions as well.*

## **The new Eastern Orthodox-Roman Catholic agreement is a landmark – but there's a long way to go.**



Pope Francis hugs Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I during a day of prayer for peace, in Assisi (AP)

by Fr Mark Drew

The Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue announced a substantial agreement but healing the historic schism still requires plenty of work.

As of last Thursday, the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church announced that it had reached substantial agreement on the questions of primacy and synodality in the Church. It was described as a "landmark agreement", and one source asked excitedly whether Orthodox Churches might soon "recognise the Pope". Has there really been a historic breakthrough in the process towards healing the thousand-year-old schism between East and West?

That the issue is a thorny one is shown by the recent history of the dialogue. In 2007 a meeting of the

Commission at Ravenna produced a statement which recognised a historical right of the Bishop of Rome to be considered as *protos*, first in the order of bishops in the pre-schism Church, while leaving it to future discussions to see how this primacy might be exercised in a future, reunited Church.

The impact of the Ravenna document was somewhat reduced by the absence of the Moscow patriarchate, the largest Orthodox Church, because of an internal Orthodox dispute. In 2014 the Commission met at Amman in Jordan, but failed to reach agreement on the theme of “Primacy and Synodality”. This year, with only the small Church of Georgia expressing reservations, the group meeting in the Italian town of Chieti has managed to achieve a consensus on the issue.

The document, bearing the full title “Synodality and Primacy during the first Millennium: Towards a common understanding in service to the Unity of the Church”, was released as early as Friday. A perusal of it shows that, while it is of undoubted significance as a stage in the dialogue, it is too early to be ringing the church bells to celebrate reunion as if it were just around the corner.

The basic reason why such jubilation would be premature is because the document confines itself to outlining a common reading of the past, rather than going into the possible shape which authority might take, and who would exercise it, in the future unity we all long for. To quote part of its conclusion, a reading of the history of the first Millennium shows a common theological, liturgical and canonical heritage, on the basis of which Catholics and Orthodox “must consider how primacy, synodality, and the interrelatedness between them can be conceived and exercised today and in the future.”

The fact that the document offers only an analysis of the way things were in the past does not, however, mean that we should minimise its importance. After all, our present divisions are rooted in a long and painful history of gradual estrangement and mutual opposition, in the course of which each side developed a polemical version of history, read in a way designed to bolster its own claims and thus irreconcilable for the other.

It should be said at once that the document has accepted a reading of the first Millennium which is more in tune with the way Orthodoxy has tended to see it than that favoured by Catholic apologetics until recent times. Until such confessional readings of history became unfashionable after Vatican II, Catholics would commonly urge Orthodox to return to the unity of the first centuries from which they were alleged to have gone into schism by rejecting the Roman Primacy which they previously accepted. In line with this view, every sign from the early Church of the East accepting a leading role for the bishop of Rome was interpreted as recognising for him the kind of role he came to play in the post-schism West.

The Chieti document unambiguously rejects this simplification of history. It recognises that even in the West the understanding of Roman primacy was the result of a development of doctrine, particularly from the fourth century, and that this development did not occur in the East: “The primacy of the bishop of Rome among the bishops was gradually interpreted as a prerogative that was his because he was successor of Peter, the first of the apostles. This understanding was not adopted in the East...” The East, in other words, rather than reneging on a common heritage, simply never accepted a development it had not been part of.

On the role of the popes in the early Ecumenical Councils, recognised by both East and West to this day, the document notes that the bishops of Rome were not present at any of them, but were either represented by legates or agreed afterwards to the conclusions. This section concludes with a statement which is music to Orthodox ears: “Reception by the Church as a whole has always been the ultimate criterion for the ecumenicity of a council.”

On the significance of appeal to Rome, which Eastern bishops in the early centuries sometimes exercised when

local synods ruled against them, and which Western apologists have stressed as proof of papal authority in the early Church, the document is unambiguous: “appeals to the bishop of Rome from the East expressed the communion of the Church, but the bishop of Rome did not exercise canonical authority over the churches of the East.”

Have the Catholic members of the Joint Commission gone native? Has the desire to win over the Orthodox, traditionally so suspicious of Catholic motives whenever unity is discussed, led them to concede too much? The reality is otherwise.

Recent scholarship, led by Catholic scholars who have freed themselves from the shackles of a one-sided apologetic no longer in favour with the Magisterium itself, have concluded that papal authority in the form it has taken in the Second Millennium West, can only be properly understood as a doctrinal development in which the East had no part. Moreover, the intuition that the authority of the pope as universal primate is only properly understood in conjunction with the authority of the episcopacy as a whole, expressed as “synodality” or “conciliarity”, is one that has been embraced enthusiastically by Catholic theology since Vatican II.

So what is the way forward? St John Paul II invited Catholics and other Christians to reflect together on how the bishop of Rome might exercise a form of servant leadership in a future, reunited Church. Joseph Ratzinger, as a theologian and then (more tentatively) as pope, opined that more could not be asked of the East than was granted in the First Millennium.

The Chieti document, if it is ratified by the Holy See, becomes the official Catholic position. As such it is of real significance. Those on the Catholic side who perpetuate the myth of an Orthodox Church subject to Rome, but which one-sidedly “broke off”, will find it uncomfortable reading. It becomes ever clearer that in the wake of Vatican II there can be no “Ecumenism of return” addressed to the East.

Will there be an equal recognition from our Orthodox partners in dialogue that talk of Rome “abandoning her errors and returning to Orthodoxy” is but a mirror image of the same polemical distortion of history? Will both sides be able to agree on the necessary grounds for unity, and the limits it must put to diversity? These are the questions on which hopes for future progress towards the unity which Christ prayed for will depend.

## Unity Celebrations Begin



Adopted from Gavin Drake, ACNS

The historic first public meeting between a Pope and an Archbishop of Canterbury since the Reformation, which took place 50 years ago in Rome, will be celebrated by Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby when they meet next week in Rome. Next week's meeting between Pope Francis and Archbishop Welby will be the third meeting between the pair — a sign of how normal the relationship between the two churches have become.

In 1966 Pope Paul VI and Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey issued a common declaration in which they agreed “to inaugurate a serious dialogue ... which, founded on the Gospels and the ancient common tradition, may lead to the unity for which Christ prayed.” That led to the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission. In 2000, a meeting between Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey and Cardinal Edward Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, led to the International Anglican–Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM).

The 50 years of closer and deeper relationships between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church is being celebrated in a week-long summit beginning Sept. 30 in Canterbury and ending Oct. 7 in Rome. The summit will involve 19 pairs of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops from around the world who have been selected by IARCCUM to “work together in joint mission” and to “look ahead to opportunities for greater unity.”

Archbishop Welby and Pope Francis will meet privately Oct. 6 ahead of a series of meetings with bishops and Vatican officials. The summit will also mark the 50th anniversary of the Anglican Centre in Rome. “The Anglican Centre has worked for fifty years to help Roman Catholics and Anglicans work together, pray together, study and talk together,” said the Most Rev. David Moxon, the Centre’s director. These celebrations mark the writing of a new chapter in the history of the Christian Church.”

“It is an immensely significant occasion,” said the Rt. Rev. David Hamid, Suffragan Bishop in Europe and the Anglican co-chair of IARCCUM. “There has been such an extraordinary progress towards reconciliation between the two communions in these past 50 years that it is easy to forget just how far we have journeyed together as sisters and brothers in Christ.