

ADDRESS AT THE ‘VISION GLORIOUS’ CELEBRATION
Wakefield Cathedral, 24 November 2013
by Dr Colin Podmore, Director of Forward in Faith

The Women Bishops Legislation

In the summer and early autumn of last year, two or three members of the Catholic Group (and it was just two or three) were saying that we’d better not vote down the former legislation, because it was the best offer we were going to get. In my view, that was wrong on two counts: it wasn’t the best offer we were going to get (as we’ve now seen), and even if it had been, it would still have been wrong to support it, because it wasn’t good enough. That was the view of the majority of the Group, and by the time we got to November everyone had accepted it. The Catholic Group joined forces with others and they killed the Measure.

This time, the Catholic Group and the Forward in Faith Executive believe that the new package *is* the best offer we are going to get. I share that view, but again, to say that is not enough. Even though it is the best offer, if it weren’t good enough I would personally want to oppose it— I’m that sort of person: my mother is Cornish and from my Cornish ancestors I have inherited rugged Cornish individualism; my father was born and brought up near from Barnsley, and I think I must leave you to imagine what characteristics I may have inherited from my Yorkshire ancestors. So for me the question is not ‘Is this package the best we’re going to get? (which it is) but crucially: ‘Is it good enough?’ In the view of the Catholic Group and the Forward in Faith Executive, and in my view, it *is* good enough. And that is why, though we can never vote in favour of women bishops, most members of the Catholic Group did vote on Wednesday for this process to go forward – rather than attempting, like King Canute, to turn back a tide that is bound to come in.

No one on any side is pretending that this package is ideal. This is the real world. It is not a perfect world – or a perfect Church (and if you ever find a perfect church this side of paradise, please send me a postcard and let me know where it is). This package isn’t ideal, but it is a great deal better than the previous legislation. Let me just give two examples.

- Last time, the Code of Practice would have been finalized *after* Final Approval of the legislation, and at that stage you can be sure that its provisions, which were already quite inadequate, would have been watered down still further. And when the Code was finished, each diocese would have had to make its own scheme. It would have been a bureaucratic nightmare and, with apologies to any lawyers present, a lawyers’ paradise. This time, everything will be finalized before the legislation receives final approval. And as our Forward in Faith statement made clear, if there is any watering down, we shall oppose the legislation vigorously.
- Last time, bishops and others could have disregarded the Code of Practice if they convinced themselves they had what the lawyers call ‘cogent reasons’ for doing so. The only redress would have been judicial review in the high court – Christians taking their internal church disputes to the secular courts, American style, which of course is something that Scripture explicitly forbids. When the history of all this is written, people will be astonished that a Christian church came as close as the Church of England did last year to making judicial review in the secular courts its preferred method of resolving internal church disputes. We did the whole Church a great service in defeating that terrible legislation.

This time, there will be a House of Bishops Declaration, not a Code of Practice, and bishops and everyone else will be bound by it. If people don't comply with it, we can have recourse to an independent reviewer (crucially, with paid administrative support) whose task will be to resolve disputes – a process that will be much simpler and cheaper than taking things to the High Court (how many PCCs would actually have been bold enough or rich enough to do that?)

So last time there was provision in law, but it would have been enforceable only with great delay and huge expense. This time the provision is not in law, but there will be a simple, cheap and swift disputes resolution procedure which will be established under canon.

These points completely vindicate our opposition to the previous legislation. Several speakers in Wednesday's debate who support women bishops effectively admitted that the legislation that we defeated was bad law and would have been bad for the Church of England as a whole. Well, they were the ones that promoted it and voted for it!

There are two other important advantages to the new package that I'd like to mention briefly:

- For us, a House of Bishops Declaration, which goes into some detail, with a disputes resolution procedure established under canon, is actually much better than the existing Act of Synod. If you read it, you'll find it's cast in very general terms, and an Act of Synod is completely unenforceable. Yet, for the most part, it has worked. There is no reason to believe that the Declaration, combined with a disputes resolution procedure established under canon, won't work even better.
- A very important element in the package is the Five Guiding Principles enshrined in the Declaration, on which its provisions are based. These recognize our position as one of theological conviction which continues to be within the spectrum of Anglican teaching and tradition. Like the Act of Synod, they place the Church of England's decision within a broader process of discernment within the Church of God. The Guiding Principles make a commitment to provision, both pastoral and sacramental, without limit of time.

There is, of course, a great deal more that could be said about the details of the package. I haven't got time to go into those details today. There will be a more detailed commentary by Fr Paul Benfield, one of our members of the Steering Committee which devised the package, in the December *New Directions*. Here I'd like to pay tribute to our two members of the Steering Committee (unusually it included five members who voted against the last Measure as well as ten who voted in favour): the Bishop of Chichester and Fr Paul Benfield. We owe them a great deal for what they have achieved by gently and patiently explaining what we need.

I should also mention that there are some details of the package that remain to be developed. The Steering Committee accepts that there will have to be special arrangements for the consecration of our bishops (and a crucial part of the package is the fact that we will continue to have bishops of our integrity – in particular, the Sees of Beverley, Ebbsfleet and Richborough will continue). We have said that those arrangements, including arrangements for when the Archbishop is a woman, need to be in place before Final Approval, and I think that is accepted.

All of this has come out of a new atmosphere of goodwill and trust that has been growing over the summer and which we saw in the Synod on Wednesday. There were a couple of offensive speeches from the other side, one of which the press of course fastened on, but overall the tone of the debate was far, far removed from the disgraceful and un-Anglican scenes we have witnessed over the last five years. I believe there has been a movement of the Spirit. So it was important that on Wednesday our representatives in the Catholic Group made positive speeches that won us a lot of goodwill across the Synod, and that – strange as it felt for many of them – they voted on this occasion for the process to move forward. As I have said, everyone understands that they won't actually be able to vote for the legislation at Final Approval. I do want to pay tribute to the way the Catholic Group have behaved throughout this whole business. They've been disciplined, united, clear, firm, positive when they could be, restrained, gracious... I could go on. They've punched way above their weight. And they have won respect across the Synod. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

Let me reiterate: we believe that these proposals are not only the best that we are going to get, but also, crucially, while far from our ideal, they are good enough. If they are weakened as the process goes forward, we shall oppose them vigorously, but if they remain as they are, they will give us the basis we need for our future life and flourishing within the structures of the Church of England.

The Society

What we have to admit, is that when the Church of England has women bishops, it will be a different sort of structure. There will be bishops whom other bishops cannot recognize as bishops in a sacramental sense. Well, that may be good enough for ecumenical relationships, but as catholic Christians we need to belong to an ecclesial body that is a good deal more like a church than that. We need bishops who are part of a college of bishops, with all of whom they are in full communion. That is where the Society, established under the patronage of St Wilfrid and St Hilda, comes in, and I want now to say something about that.

Forward in Faith is working, as it says on our membership form, 'through the Society for an ecclesial structure with a ministry and sacraments in which we can have confidence, so that we can flourish within the Church of England and make our full contribution to its life and mission'.

What will the Society be for? Well, fundamentally it will be about sacramental assurance and episcopal oversight. Our parishes will be looking to receive ministry from priests whom the Bishops of the Society are able to commend. That will guarantee sacramental assurance. And our parishes will be looking to receive episcopal ministry and oversight from the appropriate bishop of the Society.

Some key principles are already clear. First, the Society is intended to be an ecclesial body. It was never intended that there should be a membership subscription, though there was talk of donations. The Society will be like a church, not a club, and admission to the Church is by baptism, confirmation and first communion, not by signing a Standing Order. The Council of Bishops has now clarified that even further: the Society not going to be a membership organization at all, and it's also not going to have a subscription or funds. Let me underline those words: The Society is not going to be a membership organization. The Society has a new website. (I encourage you to look at it – www.sswsh.com – and I want to pay tribute to the

work of the designer, Brian Beddowes, and the tireless labour of the Society's webmaster, Fr Robert Hart.) The Society will need staff support and office. And it will need a charitable structure to hold all of that and pay for it. But we don't need to create a new charity, a new board of Trustees, a new administrative structure or rent a new office. The Catholic Movement already has a charity that is dedicated to the pursuit of 'an ecclesial structure which will continue the orders of bishop and priest as the Church has received them and which can guarantee a true sacramental life'. And if you think you've heard those words before, you have, because they're a quotation from the Constitution of Forward in Faith. Pursuit of an ecclesial structure to do precisely what the Society is intended to do is already written into the Constitution of Forward in Faith as one of the main things for which it exists. My job is to make sure that Forward in Faith can bear the weight of those tasks. We have more than enough membership organizations in the Catholic Movement already; we certainly don't need any more.

So then, the Society will work very closely with Forward in Faith. Indeed, they'll be two sides of the same coin: a democratically structured membership organization as a support structure, engaging also in political work and defence where necessary (advising the parishes, clergy and people, supporting them in their dealings with the diocesan hierarchies and the Independent Reviewer, and indeed making its own submissions from time to time) – that's Forward in Faith; and an ecclesial body led by bishops and doing the sorts of things that churches do: celebrating the sacraments, offering episcopal oversight, engaging in mission – The Society. The work of the Society will be staffed by me as Director of Forward in Faith, and when money is needed it will come from, or be channelled through, Forward in Faith. We are one body of people, but we need to be organized in two different ways for different aspects of our life.

We shall need to replicate that symbiotic relationship and that allocation of areas of our life at the regional and diocesan levels. There is a growing view that in future the structure of bishops' representatives (at the moment they're called Forward in Faith regional deans) will really belong under the Society umbrella, because they are, or should be, there to assist the bishops in their oversight of the clergy and people. They are appointed by – and dismissable by – the bishops. Their role is ecclesial. So they should fall on the Society side of things. And we really mustn't have in each diocese a Forward in Faith branch committee and a committee of the Society. We have far too many committee structures already, and in many areas they struggle to keep those structures going – people have better things to do on a Saturday morning than go to endless branch meetings. For heaven's sake, we must engage in some streamlining.

The great thing is that the Council of Bishops of the Society has begun to meet regularly under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Pontefract and with the Director of Forward in Faith as its Secretary. They've had three meetings this year, and in February they had a very productive day consultation with selected members of the Catholic Group and key figures in the Catholic Societies.

In the past there was something of a distinction. Some of the catholic bishops were members of Forward in Faith. Many of the other catholic bishops stood back from Forward in Faith, which was seen to some extent as the domain of the Bishop of Fulham and the PEVs, perhaps because it seemed too extreme. Well, those days are gone. We really haven't got the luxury of such distinctions any more. Forward in Faith must be an organization to which every traditional catholic Anglican (or, as we would say, every catholic Anglican) is proud to belong. There must and will be clear boundaries, but within those boundaries there must be no question

of a 'sunder than thou' attitude. The Catholic Movement is and should remain a broad church, and there must be room within Forward in Faith for the whole of our Movement. I am proud to say that when the Council of Bishops met last week, every single member of that Council, every single bishop round that table, was a member of Forward in Faith. And last month the Council of Forward in Faith co-opted the Bishop of Pontefract, in his capacity as Chairman of the Council of Bishops, to membership of the Council of Forward in Faith.

Many of you will have received a letter from the bishops to tell you about these developments, and if you haven't I encourage you to read it on the website.

As I've said, staff support, an office in London, a website, the mailing that went out this week to six and a half thousand people who had signed up with the Society (and here I want to pay tribute to Fr Darren Smith and his colleagues at the Additional Curates Society who printed the materials and posted them), none of that is cheap. Forward in Faith is paying for it all, and therefore I have to ask you, as the bishops have asked in their letter, to help to play your part – and help to pay for it all – by joining Forward in Faith. If you're already a member, perhaps you will consider making a donation on top of the minimum subscription. Could you afford a pound a week to finance this crucial work? Could you even contribute £10 a month (that's the cost of buying a Sunday newspaper each week or a coffee in Starbucks each week)?

Forward in Faith has had something of a funding crisis this year. We've been relying too much on legacy income. There's actually been a significant deficit between our expenditure and our regular income. That's been plugged with legacy income, but you quite literally can't bank on legacies, and when legacy income runs out for a while, as it did earlier this year, that threatens the very existence of the charity. To balance the books we're cutting costs and trying to increase income, and I hope that you'll help us with that. That will enable us to use legacy income for what it should be used for (mission and growth and one-off projects), not, as we have been, to pay our core costs.

We also have a problem with declining membership. In part that is a financial problem, because it means less income, but it also threatens our health as an organization. The greatest cause of declining membership is death, old age and illness. A lot of people joined twenty years ago, a lot of them were of a certain age then, and a lot of them are dying now. So we do need new members to join and take their place. If every member of Forward in Faith recruited just one new member, we'd double our numbers, we'd have more members than we've ever had before, and I'd be able to spend my time supporting the bishops and the parishes and not on drumming up enough cash to keep the show on the road. So please think about this: take home the form we've given you today. If you're not a member, please join. If you are, please recruit just one other person. By doing that you'll not just be helping Forward in Faith: as I've explained, you'll be supporting the bishops and helping the Society to grow and flourish as the ecclesial structure that will enable us to live and breathe and flourish within the Church of England.