

# Bishop of Coventry's speech at General Synod - Consecration of Women to the Episcopate

10th Feb 2012

**Due to reduction in the time limit for speeches at this stage of the debate, a reduced form of this speech was given.**

Thank you, Mr Chairman

I am speaking in favour of the broad thrust of the Manchester motion for three reasons.

First, the motion calls on the bishops to have one last attempt to fulfill the scriptural mandate to 'make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4.3). That is the calling of bishops in the Church: to work tirelessly for the unity of the Church, a unity that is currently at peril, a unity which people are pleading to preserve. As we heard last night from Richard Baxter, the best (potential) bishop that the Church never had, 'They must not only harken for motions for unity, but propound and prosecute them; not only entertain an offered peace, but even follow it when it flieth from them'.

Second, at its core, the motion seeks to connect with the principles and practice of episcopacy in the very early centuries of the Church. I am thinking of North Africa in the third century and particularly the way that Cyprian envisaged the episcopate.

Whilst Cyprian is often thought of as the great proponent of the powers of the diocesan bishop, he was most interested in the shared responsibility of all the bishops for the health and unity of the Church. The gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles as a group and, for Cyprian, the apostolic succession was passed to the bishops as a group – a college – rather than to individuals who happened to make up a group. In this sense, the autonomy of each bishop was, in fact, limited by the authority of the bishops acting as a group in their shared responsibility for the whole. Hence, each bishop was not solely responsible for his community. He exercised his ministry in partnership with other bishops.

This, of course, required structures for collaboration and partnership, structures that for Cyprian were rooted in the Pauline charge to 'bear with one another in love' (Ephesians 4.3).

Third, something *in the manner proposed by* (not necessarily identical with, but *in the manner of*) the

Archbishops' Amendment is needed to break through the impasse that the word 'delegation', *uninterpreted in the measure*, has delivered. It can do so without undermining the best of the intentions of the word.

It will not deny the dignity of the diocesan bishop. It will not override the principle of the diocesan bishop's invitation to another bishop to come and help, and to come to help, as it were, on the diocesan's terms. But it will allow the 'helping bishop' to come with the commensurate dignity of one who, by virtue of participation in the college of bishops, has a shared responsibility for the life of the Church in every place. It will allow the 'helping bishop' to come with the dignity of one who has, by the formal mandate of the whole church, authority to exercise such a ministry by the invitation of and conventions determined by the Diocesan bishop through the Diocesan Scheme.

The question before the Synod today is simply: 'need a word divide the Church?'. Is there not another way of expressing the same principles, a way that draws on the biblical and ancient practices of a genuinely shared responsibility for the Church by those charged with the preservation of its unity and the promotion of its health.

Is it not worth asking your bishops to at least have one last a try? You ordained them for 'just such a time as this' (Esther 4.14).