

Church of England bishops – men and women

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions' *'L'enfer est plein de bonnes volontés et désirs'*, is a maxim attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux. It might have been better if those bishops of the Church of England who amended the draft Measure, which came before the General Synod held early in July of the Church of England with the now infamous clause 5(1)c, had heeded the wisdom of the twelfth century Cistercian monk. After all, St Bernard in his time had to judge between rival claimants as pope.

Objections to the bishops' attempt to include provision for those who cannot accept the ordination of women as bishops are complex but they rest essentially on the fear that a permanent distinction will be enshrined in law between men and women bishops. In amending the legislation so that 'the exercise of ministry by those [alternative] bishops and priests will be consistent with the theological convictions' of the parish which has objected to a woman, the bishops have left a gap, albeit a narrow one, where what is often described as a 'theology of taint' could be promulgated indefinitely. Future orders of clergy might for example be scrutinised to check that they did not include any 'contamination' by a woman bishop, thus eventually producing two lines of apostolic succession and perhaps a concept of first and second-class episcopacy.

The Synod has wisely, by a substantial majority, asked the bishops to think again and come back in November with something less contentious. As such they are caught on the horns of a very Anglican dilemma, how to accommodate and in more severe cases appease people of differing theological convictions. As such it is within the genius of Anglicanism that it often succeeds (eventually) in respecting and retaining the views of minorities.

In the case of the argument about women bishops, notwithstanding the fact that the wider Anglican Communion has had women bishops for years, it is clear that an overwhelming majority in the Church of England are prepared to accept and welcome women as bishops. Forty-two of the forty four diocesan synods voted in favour and it looks like the high hurdle two thirds majority will be achievable in each house of the General Synod if and when the matter finally comes to a vote.

Given the clear desire on the part of the majority in the Church of England to proceed, it is difficult to see how those on the evangelical and anglo-catholic wings of the Church, who for different theological reasons have come together in opposition, on this occasion can be satisfied. Some of course have already left either to the Roman Catholic, but retaining Anglican identity, Ordinariate and some (albeit very few indeed) have effectively left by taking alternative oversight as offered by the newly established 'Anglican Mission in England'.

It may therefore be necessary to proceed this November with an altogether unamended Measure that simply agrees to ordain women as bishops. Such a clear move would leave casualties, but not very many, and the advantages of a truly representative Church would quickly become as obvious as the ordination of women to the priesthood twenty years ago has proved.

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