



ANGLICAN CATHOLIC FUTURE

A Statement from Anglican Catholic Future on the Seal of Confession

Reconciliation lies at the heart of the Christian faith: ‘In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them’, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5. Reconciliation lies also at the heart of Christian mission and ministry. This Paul also stressed, following the passage just quoted with the words ‘entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.’ An emphasis on reconciliation is forever before us in the readings of the liturgy, and in the writings of the tradition. Reconciliation, we also remember with gratitude, has been at the centre of the current Archbishop of Canterbury’s vision for the life of the church and of his own Archiepiscopate since his translation to that See.

Anglican Catholic Future responds to the current consultation on the seal of confidentiality associated with the ministry of confession and absolution out of a confidence in the abiding worth of that practice, and of its absolute confidentiality. This ministry has a distinctive part to play for many in fashioning a life of continued conversion to Christ. We hope that the attention now being paid to it by this working group, and by Synod, will lead to a renewed appreciation of the part that it occupies in the mission of the church, and the spiritual life of its members, and could occupy even more fully. We hope that every diocese will provide instruction for existing priests

in this manifestation of the love of God, and that every training institution will provide instruction for those in preparation for priestly ministry.



Reconciliation belongs to the ministry of all Christians, as that discussion in 2 Corinthians also makes clear. We are all ‘ambassadors for Christ’, as Paul writes, ‘since God is making his appeal through us... [namely the call] ... be reconciled to God.’ In this task, as with others, the first role of those called to positions of leadership and authority in the church is to nurture the ministry and practice of the whole people of God. As a parallel example, the work of the church leader – of the bishop, priest or deacon – as an evangelist is first of all to enable the whole church to be an evangelistic people; similarly, his or her work as pastor is to care for a caring people. As entirely consonant with this vision, the church since the days of the New Testament has been unafraid also to say that there are those called in particular to be evangelists, as in particular to be leaders, or pastors or teachers (e.g. Rom 12.4-8; Eph. 4.11; 1 Pet. 4.10-11). Similarly, since the early church a particular ministry of reconciliation has been associated with ordained leadership.

Scriptural and pragmatic reasons for this association are easy to identify. Certainly, we read in the New Testament of the value of the confession of sin from one Christian to another (‘confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another’, James 5.16), with no particular reference to the leadership roles of those involved. We read also of a specific authority to forgive or remit sins (and to refuse to forgive them), conferred upon the apostles:

Jesus said to them [the disciples – here also apostles: ‘those sent’] again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’ (John 20.21-23).

In Matthew's Gospel, a similar authority is given in particular to Peter: 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16.19).

Since the early days of the church, proper attention has been given to the context and recipients of this saying of Christ: that this authority – in a certain sense committed to the church as a whole – was and is committed to the church in the particular person of the apostles.

It is entrusted, therefore to their successors: to the bishops, whose association with the apostles as their successors is made abundantly clear by the choice of readings in the Prayer Book Ordinal for the rite of consecrating of bishops. In the words of the *Common Worship* rite of ordination for bishops, 'They are to seek out those who are lost and lead them home with rejoicing, declaring the absolution and forgiveness of sins to those who turn to Christ.' They are, however, 'to share' this ministry 'with their fellow presbyters', through presbyteral ordination. They share it also by inducting priests into tasks of ministry which are 'both yours and mine': always a share in the ministry of the bishop, as well as a ministry of the priest's own. The passage from John's Gospel just quoted was chosen by the framers of the ordinal attached to the Book of Common Prayer as the Gospel reading for the ordination of priests. The preface to the declarations in the *Common Worship* rite of ordination of priests or presbyters tells us that 'Formed by the word, they are to call their hearers to repentance and to declare in Christ's name the absolution and forgiveness of their sins.'

Clearly, not all the churches of the Reformation continued to uphold this understanding and interpretation of these passages from Matthew and John, as associating a special ministry and authority for absolution with ordination by the laying on of hands.

The Church of England however, at the Reformation, specifically and markedly continued in the established tradition of interpretation and ecclesiastical polity. It has been preserved and reiterated at every point of liturgical and juridical development since. Appeals to a pan-Protestant perspective on this ministry are therefore out of place: here it belongs to the Anglican tradition to have taken a different turn.

The age-old association of this work of the ministry of reconciliation at its most acute form with ordained ministry also exhibits eminent practical wisdom. Such work calls for both training and accountability, and both are set in place for ordained ministers. Ordination is more than a matter of professionalism, but does also involve that – and supervision and the possibility of discipline. Similarly, the church has wanted to make a strong connection between the ministry of absolution with the ministry of teaching: we need only turn to the service of Holy Communion in the Prayer Book, and its exhortation that

no man should come to the holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore if there be any of you [who]... requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.

These dimensions – of absolution, counsel and teachings – are again brought together for Anglicans in the cast iron association of absolution with ordination, and of ordination with training in pastoral practice, in Biblical teaching and in the theological inheritance of the Church.

This quotation from the service of Holy Communion reminds us that the canon under discussion by the working group is by no means the only place where individual confession and absolution is stressed, considered and upheld. The rite for the Visitation of the Sick in the Prayer Book is another witness, both in its rubric:

Here shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which confession, the Priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it) after this sort.

and the form of absolution to which this rubric refers, which is as earnest and full-blooded as anything to be found in any other communion of the Universal Church:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In 1959, the Convocations of Canterbury and York reaffirmed that it is

An essential principle of Church doctrine that if any person confess his secret and hidden sin to a priest for the unburdening of his conscience, and to receive spiritual consolation and absolution from him, such priest is strictly charged that he do not at any time reveal or make known to any person whatsoever any sin so committed to his trust and secrecy.

Within the wider Anglican Communion, we should note that principle 77 of *The Principles of Canon Law Common to the Church of the Anglican Communion* is that ‘The seal of the confessional is inviolable’ (§77.1). The secrecy that pertains to it is ‘morally absolute for the confessor, an historic obligation, a solemn bond and a sacred trust so that the penitent is able to confess in the assurance that the priest will not disclose or refer again to the matter confessed’ (§77.2).



In relation to this particular ministry of confession and absolution, the Church of England typically lives by the principle that ‘all may, some should, none must’. (That some individuals indeed should is underlined by the quotations from the service of Holy Communion and the Communion of the Sick in the Book of Common Prayer.)

For some Christians and traditions of Anglicanism, this ministry is important and life-giving, an important aid on the path to holiness; for others, and for other traditions, it does not feature prominently. One of the most pleasing and hopeful features of contemporary interfacing of traditions within our Church today is a new willingness for those who have been nurtured in one tradition to be enriched from insights from another. There is no great Rubicon to be crossed here, however: we can easily see how use of this ministry, with its ‘catholic’ associations, chimes with trends across the traditions of Christianity, such as the interest in ‘intentional’ discipleship among evangelicals. As an example, our own Archbishop of Canterbury has spoken eloquently of the value that the practice of confession and the reception of absolution holds for him.



A vital task in informing the present debate about confession and its ‘seal’ is to appreciate with clarity precisely what the seal has always been taken to mean, and not to mean. The confidentiality associated with confession simply requires the priest *not to divulge or act upon information imparted in the confession, or to mention it in future*. That, on its own terms, is absolute, but the limitation runs no further than that: if the priest hears of the confessed wrongdoing by some other means, she can and often should act upon it.

Indeed, that is precisely to honour the point about the seal as just defined: she must act no differently after the confession than if she had not heard it.

In our present discussion, serious attention should be given to the ends that are sought and to the suitability of proposed means to aid their realization. The end to which particular attention is currently drawn is the prevention of crime. In this, attention should not be withdrawn from the continued provision of pastoral care and occasions for grace for all people, including sinners and criminals of all kinds.

The desire to prevent crime is a good end, as is the desire to provide opportunities for repentance and renewal of life. Because these are good ends, we should ask all the more diligently what means would best help to achieve them.

Considering first the prevention of crime, we do not believe that allowing for breaking the seal of confessional will be any aid. The central point is that without the unbreakable seal of the confessional, not only would many confessions in general not be made (to which we will return below) but so, most of all, would those few, but precious, confessions related to the sorts of sins and crimes that have been laid before the working group and before synod. With the seal in place, even those who have transgressed in these ways may feel able to approach a priest. In that way, a journey of penitence is able to begin. Without the seal, we will not have confessions of serious crime that can be acted upon by the police; rather, we will not have confessions of serious crime at all.

One recent discussion of sacramental theology has put it this way:

We might wish, and indeed should wish, that those who are guilty of such sins would bring them to a priest for confession as a matter of urgency. All the same, even in such a case, or in the case of murder, in the words of the Church of England: even if 'a penitent's behaviour gravely threatens his or her well-being or

that of others, the priest, while advising action on the penitent's part, must still keep the confidence'. [This reference, and those below, are to Conduct of the Clergy, 7.4.] The point is that, without the unbreakable promise of the seal, there would be no confession in the first place. Only because of that unbreakable promise not to pass on what a priest hears would anyone guilty of a serious crime bring it to the priest. Without the seal, the contact would not be made; with the seal, a conversation begins: responsibilities are faced; advice is given. No priest is under an obligation to give absolution and in such situations it might be withheld and some 'appropriate action of contrition and reparation . . . required before absolution is given'. In the case of abuse, 'the priest should urge the person to report his or her behaviour to the police or social services, and should make this a condition of absolution, or withhold absolution until this evidence of repentance has been demonstrated'. Without the seal, that journey would not have begun.¹

Such discussions relate to profound matters within the Christian work of reconciliation, but they are also rare and extreme. Despite the continued attention of Hollywood, the overwhelming majority of cases when people seek this ministry from the Church do not involve serious criminal acts. While, however, the Hollywood picture is something of a distortion, we should not forget that this attention also serves to fix in the minds of the general public that this is an opportunity for grace offered across the world.

Confessions rarely involve grave crimes. Even so, while making a clean breast of sin in this way is so often of great value, it is also a difficult thing to do. Indeed, it is among the most demanding of all spiritual disciplines.

Whether making a confession stands as an integrated part of an ongoing life of prayer, worship, Bible reading and practical action, as it does for some, or whether it comes as an unfamiliar exercise, a gift at a critical moment, as it does for others, in either case the act of opening up about what we have done, and about what besets us, is difficult.

¹ Andrew Davison, *Why Sacraments?* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 138.

The promise of absolute confidentiality is part of what makes this difficult venture psychologically possible.

In contrast, as soon as the seal of confidentiality were to be qualified, and therefore weakened, the trust between the penitent and the minister would also be compromised. Currently, the priest can currently offer an assurance, that 'I cannot and will not repeat what is said here'. In contrast, a statement that 'Generally I will not pass on what is said, but in certain cases, involving serious crime I will, because I must' has none of that simplicity and communicative power.

A putative reply might be ventured, that a compromised seal would not deter many people, because most people do not commit grave crimes. This, however, is unconvincing, being pastorally and psychologically inaccurate. As anyone who hears confessions will confirm, people do not always have a reliable perspective on their sins. Moreover, it is vital that the church should not give the impression that any sin is beyond the reach of God's grace. Communicative symbolism matters here: a weakened seal of confidentiality might not explicitly teach that some sins are beyond the reach of God's forgiveness, but the impression would easily be given, all the same. Far more easily suggested, beyond even that, would be the sense that the church considers some people too compromised to deal with, too unclean for her courts, too far gone in sin and crime to be spoken to eye-to-eye.



The Church must ask itself a serious question, namely to what extent this discussion of the confidentiality of confession is in fact an exercise in displacement, albeit maybe a subconscious one. There is no evidence that the seal – the matter under review – bears directly upon any particular case of the abuse of children or vulnerable adults. There obviously have been failures of ecclesiastical procedure in relation to safeguarding; the seal of the confessional is not one of them.

The seal may, however, be a more convenient target for change than a more root-and-branch discussion of the conduct and mindset that have been demonstrated by some aspects church procedure and practice.

This ministry of reconciliation, in the form we have received and preserved it, is a unique part of the pastoral and spiritual riches of the church. It would be tragic if it were compromised simply in order that the institution of the church could seem to be ‘doing something’, when the proposed changes are entirely tangential – even unrelated – to the problem, indeed scandal, that is the context for these discussions.



We have seen that a statement by the Convocations of Canterbury and York in 1959 described the seal of confession as an ‘essential principle of Church doctrine’. On that basis, no change could be advisable, or even possible, simply on the grounds that it is thought to be expedient (although, indeed, we do not believe that it would be expedient). The Church of England does not frame doctrine pragmatically, but on the basis of the tradition we have received, to which our liturgy and formularies bear witness.

To change our practice on this matter, we would have to show that we have changed our doctrine. It is impossible to show that we have changed our doctrine, since there has quite obviously been no deliberation *of a depth* that could possibly lead to such a change, as for instance there was over the question of the ordained ministry of women. There has been no extended discussion and deliberation *in the places* where it should and must take place: in Synod, in the parishes, among the theologians of the church, with our ecumenical partners. (The ecumenical import of any change to the proviso should be weighed carefully.)

Moreover, since such a deliberation is only just beginning, it cannot therefore be said to have been undertaken *for the length of time* that such

deliberation would typically last, with the question of the ordination of women serving again as a test case.



When Christ entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to the Church, it was so that sinners could be brought into the restored relationship with God made possible through his death and Resurrection. This ministry is given so that the prodigal may return home, so that those weighed down with sin and shame may 'go, and sin no more'. Central to this practice, and invariable in the Church of England's understanding of it, is the inviolability of the seal. The absolute trustworthiness of the encounter for confession and absolution provides a space in which the penitent can unburden his or her soul, where contrition can flow, and where the salve of absolving grace can be given. It is our experience that penitents and confessors treat this practice with the utmost seriousness, as a place where human sin and frailty is transformed into the new life of the risen Christ, through the mercy of God. We strongly resist any move that may put a stumbling block before those who seek his reconciling grace.

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Commemoration of Richard Hooker*