

Anglican Orders: The Growing Consensus

by John Jay Hughes

With a comment by John Coventry, S.J.

The question of Anglican orders is often thought to be a mere side issue in the dialogue between Canterbury and Rome. In one sense this is true: even were Rome to recognize the validity of Anglican orders, it would not bring about reunion, as the example of the Orthodox clearly shows. Yet in another sense the question is important; for it involves nothing less than the recognition by Catholics of the true ecclesial character of the Anglican Communion. It was recognition of this fact which led the editor of this journal to commission a full-length review article of the writer's *Stewards of the Lord*¹ and to select Fr John Coventry, S.J., one of England's leading Catholic ecumenists, for this important task.² The present writer is honoured by this selection and is happy to respond to the editor's offer of space for a reply. The review article unhappily contains serious misunderstandings as well as misrepresentations of the book's argument. These make a reply essential—not in any spirit of personal self-defence, but in the interest of the issue itself.

1. If the book gives the reader the impression (as Fr Coventry charges in his opening paragraph) of being written to support an *a priori* thesis, adopted in advance, this is unfortunate. For in fact exactly the opposite is the case. It is of course impossible for someone who has enjoyed for over three decades the blessings of the Anglican sacramental system, and who for seven years had the high privilege of holding (like his father and grandfather before him) the ministerial commission of the Anglican Communion, and who remains profoundly grateful for these things, to approach the question of Anglican orders without what the Germans call a certain *Vorverständnis*. This remains true even though one admits that such purely subjective considerations can never be decisive for the Church's official judgment about the validity of Anglican orders. It must be stated, however, that the writer's clear impression after a careful reading, some six years ago, of Francis Clark's works on Anglican orders was that the case he had presented was irrefutable. It was the discovery in the summer of 1965 that Clark had based his central argument in *Anglican Orders and Defect of Intention*³ on mutilated quotations from Catholic authors which provided the first glimmer of expectation that a reappraisal of the case against

¹Sub-title: *A Reappraisal of Anglican Orders* (Sheed and Ward), London and Sydney 1970. Referred to hereafter as 'S.L.'.

²'Anglican Orders: Re-assessing the Debate' *New Blackfriars*, January 1971.

³London 1956; out of print. A preliminary account of these mutilations was given in the writer's 'Ministerial Intention in the Administration of the Sacraments' in the *Clergy Review* 51 (1966), 763–76. The case first advanced there, to which no reply has been forthcoming, is considerably amplified in S.L., Part II.

Anglican orders might be possible. Yet even then the far more impressive case built up in Clark's *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation*¹ seemed impregnable. Only after many months of laborious research did the basic flaws in Clark's arguments, clearly described in *Stewards of the Lord*, begin to appear. Fr Coventry concedes that 'Hughes makes many inroads on [Clark's] position' (C. 36). The book does not describe the slow and lengthy process by which the writer's mind moved from a conviction that Clark's case against Anglican orders was irrefutable to a realization that that case was in fact far flimsier than previously supposed. But on pages 8f of *Stewards of the Lord* the author reveals that the research which has now produced two books was suggested to him by a Catholic ecumenist in Germany 'and occasioned the author no little astonishment when it was first made' (S.L. 9). The 'astonishment' here referred to arose from the writer's original impression that Clark had driven the final nail into the Anglican coffin; this is not consistent with the charge that both the present writer and Francis Clark 'were first quite convinced *a priori* of the truth of their thesis, and then set out to prove it' (C. 36).

2. Fr Coventry maintains that despite the 'many inroads' made on Clark's position, his 'basic thesis appears still to stand; viz. however many fully understandable reasons there may have been for the Reformers' rejection of the doctrine that the Mass is a sacrifice, reject it they did. Hughes clearly accepts this conclusion, though he does not come out boldly and say so' (C. 36). Yet on page 239 of his book the author has written that the authors of the original Anglican Ordinal 'certainly intended to deny, and did deny, the "sacrificing priesthood" as they saw it on every hand, as it was explained in the school theology of the day (which was itself little more than a subsequent justification of an implicitly sub-Christian Mass system) and as it has been understood and explained by a host of latter-day apologists of the type of Vaughan and Messenger and Clark'. Obviously this denial of 'sacrificing priesthood' involved rejection of the doctrine that the Mass is a sacrifice. However, the Reformers' rejection of eucharistic sacrifice cannot be properly evaluated until the *reasons* for that rejection are examined. For rejection of a *term* ('eucharistic sacrifice') is not necessarily equivalent to rejection of the *thing*. It is a central argument of *Stewards of the Lord* that the understanding of eucharistic sacrifice which governed the Reformers' rejection of this doctrine is one which no Catholic theologian would uphold today. If this argument be granted (and Fr Coventry nowhere questions it), Clark's basic argument, asserting the *fact* of the Reformers' rejection of eucharistic sacrifice, completely loses the significance attributed to it by Clark and cannot therefore (*pace* Fr Coventry) 'appear still to stand' (C. 36).

3. Nowhere in *Stewards of the Lord* is it suggested (as readers of the

¹London and Westminster, Maryland, 1960; 2nd ed. Oxford 1967.

review article might suppose) that the Church has now decided that the Mass is not a sacrifice or that the priest's role in offering it is not unique. Trent has firmly committed us to a belief in the sacrificial nature of the eucharist and hence of ministerial priesthood (though not to an *exclusively* sacrificial understanding of these things). Hence the book states explicitly that 'no theology of the ministry will be able to gain ultimate acceptance amongst Catholic theologians . . . which fails to find a legitimate place for the Tridentine statements about ministerial priesthood' (S.L. 210). Rather it is the argument of the book that the true, biblical understanding of eucharistic sacrifice (and of that priesthood through whose ministry it is offered by the whole people of God) is now happily being recovered after centuries of forgetfulness;¹ and that this understanding of the Mass was not available to the Reformers in the sixteenth century. It is, furthermore, significant that this new, but in reality older, understanding is finding increasing acceptance today on the part of Protestants, who are untroubled by the fear that they are thus repudiating their Reformation heritage.²

4. It is unfortunate that Fr Coventry includes the writer amongst those who 'have nowhere examined or stated clearly what they mean by validity' (C. 38). For the introduction to *Stewards of the Lord* contains a section entitled 'What is validity?' (S.L. 2–5), which defines the notion exactly as Fr Coventry does and even *cites his own words to do so!* (S.L. 3). With him the present writer holds, and has clearly stated at the outset of his book, that validity is an essentially juridical category; that it comprises the Church's guarantee that, when certain essentially juridical criteria are fulfilled, the sacrament in question can be recognized as the Church's sacrament, with Christ's promise attached to it; but that when because of some technicality these criteria are *not* fulfilled and a verdict of invalidity is pronounced, 'this is no guarantee that such ministries [in a broader context one could say 'sacraments'] are unfruitful' (S.L. 4). While grateful for Fr Coventry's fuller statement of this principle, the author submits that it is identical with that clearly enunciated in the introduction to his book.

5. In neither of his books on the question does the writer 'advocate . . . an official reconsideration of Anglican orders by the Roman Catholic Church' (C. 40). On the contrary, his second book contains an explicit 'word of warning' against any exaggerated hopes concerning a purely Roman examination of the matter (S.L. 305f). The writer does, however, welcome the discussion of the question by representatives of *both* Churches in the international Anglican Catholic unity commission, and is especially gratified by publication

¹Cf. what is said on this point in S.L. 107f.

²Cf. the lengthy quotation from the French Calvinist, Max Thurian, in S.L. 187, n. 109. For further evidence of this kind see the writer's 'Eucharistic Sacrifice: Transcending the Reformation Deadlock', in *Worship* (U.S.A.), 43 (1969), 532–44.

of the papers presented at the most recent meeting in Venice in September 1970.¹

6. At the end of his article Fr Coventry expresses a doubt as to whether 'Catholic theology of the ministry in general, of the priesthood, and of sacramental efficacy [is] sufficiently coherent and cohesive at the moment for Rome to take up the question' (C. 40). It is regrettable that he nowhere mentions one of the book's crucial sections (S.L. 202–24), which gives a summary of contemporary Catholic thinking about ministerial priesthood, and carefully analyses the doctrine of Vatican II on this subject. This was intended as a positive contribution to the ongoing discussion, showing both Catholics and Protestants that the authentic Catholic doctrine of ministerial priesthood does not involve the idea of 'sacrificing priesthood' in the extreme and exclusive form advanced by opponents of Anglican orders. What else is this but 'helping each other in the general debate' (C. 40)? If the writer's contribution is unhelpful, let that be stated, with reasons. But to pass it over in silence or treat it as non-existent is certainly unhelpful to all participants in the debate.

7. Fr Coventry begs 'leave to doubt how well Fr Hughes knows Anglicanism' (C. 40). This doubt can be swiftly resolved. Apart from the family heritage referred to under number 1 above, the writer has experienced Anglicanism as a worshipper, theological student, and Anglican priest in almost a dozen of its world-wide provinces, the only larger areas not represented being Africa, Australasia and continental Asia. Fr Coventry goes on to charge that the writer 'makes no mention of the Protestant Anglicans who hailed Clark's thesis with joy, saying they heartily agreed that the Reformers did not mean to get rid merely of some fringe superstitions, but of the sacrificial doctrine of the eucharist itself: this, in their view, was what the Reformation was all about' (C. 40). Apart from the fact that such Anglicans *are* mentioned in the book,² it is disingenuous, to put it no higher, to mention 'the Protestant Anglicans who hailed Clark's thesis with joy' without so much as a passing reference to the reason for this joy: because Clark's militantly anti-Protestant and distorted presentation of Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the eucharist and the ministry makes it so easy for Protestants to prove that Roman Catholicism is a betrayal of the gospel! *Of course* conservative evangelicals would protest against any recognition by Rome of 'Anglican presbyters as "really priests"' (C. 40). But this is because they assume that Rome is committed to a sub-Christian doctrine of 'sacrificing priesthood'. And it is a central argument of *Stewards of the Lord* that Rome is *not* committed to this

¹Due to the British postal strike the writer has not yet received these papers and is unable to comment on their contents.

²Cf. S.L. 208 including note 52, bibliography 345, s.v. 'Beckwith, Roger', 38f and 9, where clear reference is made to this theological school, though the only specific citation is of a Methodist representative of it, Franz Hildebrand.

doctrine, which is 'almost a caricature of the Church's authentic teaching' (S.L. 223). If this argument be untrue, let that be stated, with reasons. But to ignore it is a grave disservice to the 'fraternal discussion' (C. 40) which the author, quite as much as Fr Coventry, is trying to advance. It is a further disservice to this discussion to suppress the fact that in official Roman Catholic terminology Fr Coventry and the writer are themselves but 'presbyters'. For Roman Catholics, just as much as 'Protestant Anglicans', are committed to the belief that, in a strict sense, the only 'real priest' is Jesus Christ.

In suggesting that the writer is insufficiently acquainted with Anglicanism, and supporting this suggestion with a reference to conservative evangelicals who stubbornly misunderstand Catholic teaching (or 'hail . . . with joy' [C. 40] as unrepresentative a spokesman as Francis Clark as an authentic authority for that teaching, which comes to the same thing), Fr Coventry is in reality displaying a form of ecclesiastical myopia unhappily all too common in England amongst both Anglicans and non-Anglicans. This consists in identifying Anglicanism with special local conditions prevailing in the provinces of Canterbury and York. This myopia has recently been complained of by the Scottish Episcopalian, Prof. Donald M. MacKinnon of Cambridge.¹ The present writer is constrained to repeat his already published contention that the present militancy and prominence of conservative evangelicals in the Church of England is in no sense representative of world-wide Anglicanism as a whole.² This remains true despite the small pockets of conservative evangelical strength outside of England, a notable example being the archdiocese of Sydney, where the ordinary has hardly covered himself with glory by refusing last year to come and say the Lord's Prayer with the Pope.³

The growing consensus

The main criticisms of *Stewards of the Lord* expressed by Fr Coventry are based either upon a misapprehension of the book's arguments or upon their suppression. This permits the conclusion that on essential points the author's position is in agreement with that of this critic. And this points, surely, to the 'growing consensus' mentioned in the title of this article: that while the Roman Catholic Church has not yet been able to place its own 'guarantee' on Anglican orders, 'it by no means follows that they are absolutely null and utterly void'

¹Cf. MacKinnon, 'The Case for Disestablishment', in *The Tablet*, 19th/26th December, 1970, 1229f.

²Cf. J. J. Hughes, 'Ecumenism is a Two-Way Street: a Reply to Roger Beckwith', in *Clergy Review* 54 (1969), 275-80, and 'Let's Move Beyond Polemic: a Plea to Roger Beckwith' in *Clergy Review* 55 (1970), 460-66.

³That the Anglican archbishop's attitude is identical with that of successive occupants of the see of Westminster does nothing, five years after Vatican II, to justify it, no matter how much one may respect the subjective sincerity of the archbishop's motives or his courage in swimming against the ecumenical stream and the clearly expressed sentiments of many of his fellow bishops, his clergy, and his flock.

(C. 40); and that if we continue 'helping each other in the general debate' we may confidently look forward to the day 'when the fraternal discussion [will be] completed' and Rome *will* be able to place her guarantee on Anglican orders, 'simply to give outward expression to a foregone conclusion' (C. 40).

Comment by Fr Coventry

I am sorry Fr Hughes feels misrepresented. He spent years writing a careful book, and a few hours' work by a reviewer can easily be unjust. I think one minor point and two of substance emerge.

1. The minor point is the question of perspective about what is representative of Anglicanism. In a sense nothing is except comprehensiveness; and Anglicans are by no means ashamed of that. Conservative evangelical views are strong in the Church of England, but almost absent in America. Canterbury and York are not the whole of Anglicanism, but they are numerically well over half of it, and qualitatively prominent.

2. A theologically important point is the relation of faith to even its simplest doctrinal expression. The latter must be a criterion (if not the only one) of the former. I wonder if it is possible to reject every idea of eucharistic sacrifice known at the time, and not reject the thing.

3. I do sincerely think, and hope my review made clear, that Hughes's book won the argument it set out to win. But, in asking whether it was the right argument, I wanted to indicate the need of a new approach. Of course I was aware that Hughes referred in his Introduction to my thoughts on validity (who ever misses a reference to himself!), but I did not feel he had assimilated or made any use of them. Natural enough: one always writes the book before the Introduction!

I would like to see 'validity' given what is I think its old sense of strength, authenticity, full value. (This incidentally would not make it possible to speak of *episcopi vagantes* as validly ordained.) I would like to see orders recognized as orders in so far as a Church is recognized as Church, and not vice versa. This seems better theological sense, though the subject needs further study: the two interact; ministry is not solely constitutive of Church, but is a constitutive element. This approach would allow recognition of the sacramental efficacy of Anglican (and other) orders without removing the need for broader efforts at real union. It would open up the possibility of limited intercommunion as a means to union. So, of course, does the winning of the 'old argument' by Fr Hughes: but (it seems to me at least) in a way that leaves Roman Catholics and Protestants too far apart. It only looks to Anglicans; and it offers them a 'validity' that many would not want.