

Church of England women bishops vote is obstacle on the path to unity

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The Church of England's decision to consecrate women as bishops marked a "difficult moment" that will "sadly" harm relations with the Catholic Church, the archbishop responsible for ecumenism has warned.

Speaking for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Archbishop Bernard Longley said today that the end goal of dialogue between the two Churches remained "full visible ecclesial communion" that "embraces full communion in the episcopal office".

"The decision of the Church of England to admit women to the episcopate therefore sadly places a further obstacle on the path to this unity between us," he added.

"At this difficult moment we affirm again the significant ecumenical progress which has been made in the decades since the Second Vatican Council and the development of firm and lasting friendships between our communities. We rejoice in these bonds of affection and will do all we can to strengthen them and seek together to witness to the Gospel in our society," he said.

However he said the bishops "note and appreciate" the pastoral provision made within the legislation for "those members of the Church of England who continue to hold to the historic understanding of the episcopate shared by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches".

The editor of the Vatican's semi-official newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, Giovanni Maria Vian, who is also a historian, said the vote will have "an extremely negative impact" on the path to ecumenical unity.

He said: "It's a decision that complicates the ecumenical path. The problem is not only with Rome but also with Orthodox Churches, and that the Anglican Church is itself divided on the issue."

He said that the Anglicans in the southern half of the globe, who are now the majority, are largely

opposed to female bishops.

"It's a problem for the Anglican Communion, which will now have even more internal divisions. But this decision also complicates the ecumenical movement towards the ancient Eastern Churches and the Orthodox Churches."

"The 'yes' to women bishops is a step that does not facilitate the unity of doctrine."

"To keep the hope of unity alive, spiritual ecumenism and the daily friendship between Christians of different denominations will have to grow and overcome the theological divisions."

"We need however to clarify some key points. This is a serious decision that is likely to have an extremely negative impact on the route towards the unity of all Christians."

Ruth Gledhill - The Tablet