

## **Moral Decision Making: A More Inclusive View:**

### **Summary of presentation to the Louisiana Interchurch Conference Fall Board of Directors Meeting, September, 2015**

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The last phase of ARC/USA sought to find common ground between Anglicans and Roman Catholics on teaching authority and Christian ethics.<sup>1</sup> The text begins by acknowledging disagreement between the two communions on a number of questions, from divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, and abortion, rooted in their different ways of teaching. While the Roman Catholic Church has a supreme and authoritative teaching magisterium, exercised jointly by the bishops united with the bishop of Rome, the forty-four churches of the Anglican Communion have no such office. The Roman Catholic tendency is to teach authoritatively from Rome on many questions, leaving little for individual interpretation, while for Anglicans without an authoritative universal magisterium “it is difficult to state definitively what Anglicans hold on many specific matters” (no. 29). As the ARC text says, “Anglicans are typically more reticent, and constitutionally more decentralized, than Roman Catholics in the articulation of moral truth” (no. 32).

#### **A Broader Approach**

At the same time, during our discussion in the years prior to finalizing the statement on ecclesiology and moral discernment, I several times had the impression that Catholics needed to address some of these questions more adequately. I say this, not to argue that Catholic teaching on this or that question is wrong, but to suggest that there may be resources in our own tradition that may have been overlooked, resources that might lead to a deeper understanding of the issues involved, and perhaps a new context for addressing them.

The following points should always be kept in mind. First, the term “magisterium” as it is understood today is largely a product of the nineteenth century. Second, Vatican II changed the institutional ecclesiology of its predecessor, which divided the Church into the “Church teaching” and the “Church taught” to a more inclusive understanding of the Church as a

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<sup>1</sup> Anglican-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation in the U.S.A., “Ecclesiology and Moral Discernment: Seeking a Unified Moral Witness,” February 25, 2014.

*communio* of pastors and faithful. It emphasized that the faithful because of the *sensu fidei* share in the Church's infallibility (cf. LG 12; 25), and more recently the Vatican International Theological Commission has emphasized that the faithful "are not merely passive recipients of what the hierarchy teaches and theologians explain; rather, they are living and active subjects within the Church," (*The Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, no 67), playing a role in the development of doctrine and the Church's moral teaching.

Pope Francis has also sought to develop a more inclusive vision of the Church. He has moved the Church to a fresh reception of Vatican II, argued that the Ignatian principle of "thinking with the Church" means thinking with the whole Church, not just with the hierarchy, and sought to renew the Synod of Bishops into a genuine expression of the Church collegial nature. Cardinal Baldisseri's request to the bishops of the Church to survey their faithful on questions concerning divorce and remarriage, sexuality, and contraception for the Synod on the Family was an unprecedented effort to consult the faithful. Finally, while Pope Francis is not concerned with changing doctrine, he seems to be trying to move the Church towards a new stance on difficult questions such as homosexuality and contraception, as John Langan argued in an article in *America* magazine.<sup>2</sup> But changing one's stance is never easy, as it calls on both the Church and individuals to consider another approach, a deeper understanding, and a change to heart.

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<sup>2</sup> John Langan, "See the Person: Understanding Pope Francis' statements on homosexuality," *America* March 10, 2014; <https://www.google.com/search?q=John+Langan%2C+%E2%80%9CUnderstanding+Pope+Francis%E2%80%99+statements+on+homosexuality%2C%E2%80%9D&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>