



An important step in ecumenism was taken recently when the report of the second Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) was published. The first ARCIC report came out as long ago as 1981 and dealt with the Eucharist, Ordination and authority in the Church. It was striking then that the members of the commission discovered that Anglicans and Roman Catholics weren't as far apart in their thinking on these matters as one might have expected. The agreements reached then have had a very positive effect on relationships between the two Communion.

This second ARCIC report deals, among other things, with the place of Mary. Now there's a subject with potential for conflict if ever there was one, but, once again, this group of eminent Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians have discovered that they were not as far apart as they had expected.

Of course, there are many Anglicans who have never seen Mary as a problem, and in fact one of the most helpful books about her was written by a Methodist, "Five for Sorrow; Ten for Joy" by Neville Ward. Some, though, find her very difficult indeed; some believe that Roman Catholics worship the Blessed Virgin; that they put her on a par with God himself and that they believe allsorts of things about her which are not supported by scripture. Certainly there have been some Roman Catholics who have gone over the top in their devotion to her, but in reaction to this, many Anglicans have denied any significance to her whatever, and have thereby deprived themselves of the opportunity to meditate on her and her role and her significance for the Church.

Proper devotion to Mary goes well back into the history of the Church. Long before the 11th century schism between east and west, and long,

long before the Reformation, to a time when there weren't Roman Catholics and Anglicans and Methodists and Reformed Churches; a time when we were all just 'Christians.' Then, the Church described Mary as theotokos "Mother of God." To describe Mary as Mother of God is not an exaggeration of her status but a description of her son. If Jesus is God then Mary is indeed the mother of God incarnate.

The trickiest problems surround the dogmas the Roman Catholic Church has declared on its own during the time the Church has been divided. That is to say the 'Immaculate Conception' (the idea that Mary was born without sin) and the 'Assumption' (that Mary didn't die but was 'assumed' bodily into heaven like Elijah). Many Anglicans have considered these to be illegitimate doctrines because they were unscriptural and because they were decided on by the Roman Catholic communion alone without reference to a full ecumenical council of the Church. The members of ARCIC 2 have concluded that, in their view, the two disputed doctrines do express the grace and hope of God as they are described in scripture, so that agreement provides grounds for further coming together. The other important conclusion the commission came to about these two doctrines is that inter-Communion should not depend on Anglicans being required to give assent to them.

ARCIC 2 doesn't believe that Anglicans and Roman Catholics are going to agree completely on Mary. Diversity will undoubtedly continue; but what they do conclude is that we have more in common than we might have thought; that Anglicans need not reject devotion to Mary out of hand and, perhaps most importantly of all, that the diversity of belief is not such as to justify continued separation at the Eucharist.

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COMMON GROUND

In this edition Michael Camp writes our leading article. It also appears in the magazines of Bromley Methodist Church & Bromley URC