

SCP News January 2009

From the Rector General

It was a real honour and delight for me to be elected as Rector General at the AGM of the Society held at Chichester in July. When I was approached to see if I was willing to stand I have to say that I didn't much persuading. The Society of Catholic Priests has been an important element in my life since I became a member in 1995. I believe in SCP and so I'm delighted to be able to assist in its development over the next three years.

It was interesting that the first thing that I had to do on taking the chair at the AGM was to field an item of 'Any other business' which caused quite a stir. Some of the members present wished a letter of thanks to be sent to his Holiness Pope Benedict following a statement of support that he had made on behalf of Archbishop Rowan. The following is the heart of what was said.

*Your sensitivity towards the situation in the Church of England and particularly your concern for the Archbishop of Canterbury at this critical time in our life moved us to thank you. You express a concern for the unity of the Church of England which very much echoes our own desire. We sincerely believe that the Holy Spirit has led us to this moment when we prepare for the ordination of women to the episcopate. At the same time we are conscious that we have brothers and sisters in the church who in all conscience cannot accept this decision.*

*It is not our desire to see anyone leave the church in which they were raised and which they call home. Your encouragement to the Church of England to stay united and your support of the Archbishop of Canterbury was an action of great pastoral sensitivity.*

A similar letter was sent to the Archbishop pledging our loyalty and support in these difficult and demanding times. I received back a letter from the Archbishop expressing his appreciation of our support – as yet nothing has emerged from the corridors of the Vatican!

As a member of General Synod I receive *New Directions*, the magazine of Forward in Faith. It always makes for fascinating reading. Following the meeting of General Synod in July the temperature of the debate around women in the episcopate has been raised. The latest edition of *New Directions* and the newspaper *Forward ! plus* concentrate heavily on the Code of Practice that the Manchester Group are now working on and which is due to come to the meeting of Synod in February. 'A Code of Practice will not do' it trumpets. For all of us what is contained in that Code of Practice is going to be critical.

I am convinced that when women are ordained to the episcopate they need to have the freedom to be bishops just as men have. Though there will have to be in place provisions for those who are unable to accept the sacramental ministry of a woman there must be no compromise of the position of the bishop as bishop within a diocese. That is why I with the majority in Synod voted against a number of

amendments in July which would have undermined this basic principle. It is all about ecclesiology.

There was something of a heated debate recently on Topica about the role of the Society. Are we a campaigning organisation, do we take a political stand, or are we simply a support group for one another – a priests club.

I was thinking about this whilst I was at the AGM of the Chapter of which I was a member. During the Mass we renewed our promise as we are required to do each year. The very first thing we said was:

*We believe that the churches of the Anglican Communion are part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, ordaining men and women to serve as deacons, priests and bishops in the church of God.*

This is the living out of something which is at the very heart of what we believe, that, as it says in the Manual we 'believe that as a witness to the universal nature of the priesthood of Christ the church should ordain to serve as deacons, priests and bishops in the church of God all those whom the church discerns as being called by God to such offices regardless of race, gender, disability or sexual orientation'. Though we might leave active campaigning to other groups that many of us are associated with yet, holding this as a tenant of our belief, we cannot fail to think and be political at such a time as this.

At the meeting of Rectors that was held at Southwark recently, reference to which is made elsewhere in this Newsletter, an important thing was said. One of the Rectors pointed out what we all really know, that our Society provides a safe place, a supportive place for women and men, but especially at this time for women.

We know that it is God's will that the fullness of humanity, the richness of our nature be reflected in the ministry of the church and that because of this women will be ordained as bishop. That must be – but we have a hard journey yet to travel and I would like to think that the Society will be saying clearly, yes in words but also in actions, that this is the right journey for the church to make and that we all walk it together.

I am sure that all those of us who are members of General Synod will be vigilant and determined in the February Synod to make sure that the church remains courageous and committed to the decision it has already made.

Andrew Nunn

Rector General