Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

More than 50 years ago an exchange took place which set the future agenda of Christian Ecumenism. Pope Paul VIth gave Archbishop Michael Ramsey the ring which he wore as Cardinal Archbishop of Milan. To this day every Archbishop of Canterbury wears that ring on their official visits to the Holy See. Officially the Holy Roman Church has not changed its position about the efficacy of Anglican Orders (Absolutely Null and Void) but the actions and gestures of Pope Paul and now Pope Francis indicate a different understanding of how God is using both of our Churches to bring the Gospel to an expectant world in need of hope and deliverance from the consequences of sin. These gestures are backed up by various documents, starting with those produced by the Second Vatican Council which recognized our Sisterhood in the Body of Christ.

Since that radical gesture on the occasion of Archbishop Ramsey’s visit, an outward and visible sign of our mutual ministry in Christ, the Anglican Centre in Rome, has been working to encourage, sustain and develop the evangelistic implications of words and gestures as they have presented themselves in the modern era of Ecumenical relations. This center is the permanent presence of the Anglican Communion in Rome. It is a living symbol of our commitment to full and visible unity in the Body of Christ. The current director of the center, Archbishop Sir David Moxon, believes that we have reached a moment when God’s appointed time, Kairos, is afoot in Rome and with our relationship as sister Churches. For him the landscape in which our Churches are working together is changing. We have come to recognize our mutual need of each other, but more than that the goal of Christian unity is not ourselves but the coordinated pursuit of peace and justice in the world that all God’s children might flourish.

On Wednesday, October 5th a series of papers where delivered in a lecture hall at the Pontifical Gregorian University. These were part of the discussions and mutual preparations which 19 pairs of Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops participated in over a week’s time in Canterbury and Rome. Their mutual purpose was to explore how they might better live into the landscape which Archbishop Moxon has observed during his tenure at the Anglican Centre. At this Symposium I experienced a loving desire for God and each other and a willingness to be informed by our need of each other. This golden thread born of patient faith and realism will help each Sister Church to extend the gift of hospitable presence which allows us to the gift of each other’s experience in walking the Way of Christ. The purpose of our engagement in ecumenism is not for ourselves but all those yet to be touched by the wounded and loving hands of Christ. I am put in mind of Archbishop William Temple’s observation that as an organization the Church does not exist for itself.

Because we are no longer Strangers but Pilgrims together the Wednesday ended in the celebration of Vespers at the Church of St. Andrew and St. Gregory on Mont Celio. Presiding were Archbishop Justin Welby and Pope Francis. The carved ivory head of St. Gregory the Great’s crozier along with an icon of Gregory Commissioning St. Augustine of Canterbury was placed to north side of the Altar. Statements were made in words and gestures. A common declaration was signed. The Pope gave the Archbishop a crozier modeled on the ivory head of St. Gregory the Great and the Archbishop gave the Pope his pectoral cross. Together they commissioned and blessed the nineteen pairs of Bishops to return to their Diocese to work together with intention and openness that the world might be served with tenderness and loving kindness.

The joint pontifical vespers presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Holy Father was the result of many years of relationship building with the aim of learning how to listen to each other. It is a ministry rooted in Jesus desire that we learn to love one another as he and the Father love each other. You might say that it is a continuation of the dialogue on the road to Emmaus – whereby our Lord continues to open our minds to the purposes of God.

For 50 years the Anglican Centre has been a continual place of engagement. It sustains, nurtures and encourages our mutual search for unity. In too many ways to number it provides and enables our different sectors of the Church to stretch beyond any theme or idea and to learn how to depend on each other and the Lord to pursue God’s Unity. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that unity is not to be found in our interests and desires but in life derived from Christ and shared with one another.

In the early days of our common work for unity the focus was on issues of doctrine and shared belief. This work has shown us how much we have in common. Through it we were able to put to bed a number of misunderstandings and wrong perceptions. By it we started on a path which pursued together turns us towards a pilgrimage of love that not only allows us to see each other differently but will compel us towards concrete acts of hospitality and joint service. We are no longer able to hide behind our need to teach each other the truth as we perceive it but have become prepared to ask what we need to learn from each other, as Christ the giver of all good gifts would have us pursue. It is this quest for understanding that has inspired the present approach to our current dialogues.Rooted in the pilgrim life of mutual discovery it is called “receptive” ecumenism.

As an instrument of our continuing work with the Holy Roman Church, the Anglican Centre seeks to embody this approach to ecumenism in all its activities. Just as the Risen Jesus used the disciples knowledge to open them to a new way of perceiving their experience of our Lord’s Passion on the road to Emmaus, receptive Ecumenism attempts to place our mutual need to learn anew the wonders of God in Christ Jesus at the center of our future work. On his way to Emmaus, Jesus leads his disciple through an experience of dialogue, education and hospitality. It is this same pattern which inhabits receptive ecumenism. With patience, understanding and mercy towards each other it is believed that our experience of companionship and unity will only deepen to the point that God will in Gods good time make us one as the three persons of the Trinity are one.

Ultimately this is a dialogue which will and already has had consequences in the Anglican Communion as a whole. We are a Church made up of diverse elements in need of ways to converse with each other in an open and secure framework. By using and consolidating the many connections which are ours in the Communion we can grow charity and truth which leads to unity, a unity that will help the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church - Unity which can only be discovered in Christ Jesus. Pope Francis summed up the week when he said. “Unity happens when we walk together.” Let it be our prayer that the friendships and willingness to make common cause engendered by this time of pilgrimage may bear much fruit.

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