

Theological Review of the CNC: Interim Presentation to General Synod July 2017

Professor O'Donovan

When a CNC meets to nominate a diocesan bishop, it has fourteen voting members, supported by the two Secretaries: the two Archbishops, six diocesan members elected for the occasion, and six central members who serve for a five-year term. The central members give continuity and stability. As well as working on each vacancy as it arises, they meet with the Archbishops from time to time to discuss matters of process and wider context. They are involved in large expenditures of time. In the course of our review of the CNC we have met all the outgoing central members, and have been impressed both by the importance of the role and the quality of the service that has been devoted to it. Synod will shortly be electing new central members. Because the role is so demanding, the Business Committee has graciously invited us to share a preview of our Report's reflections about it.

We are going to speak especially on two key concepts - those of *discernment* and *representation*. Those words are constantly on people's lips; we hope to give a little substance to them. We also want to say a word about *trust*.

A discernment looks forward. It is focussed upon the next step to be taken. That is what makes it different from backward-looking reflections and judgments. Of course, one cannot look forward without looking backward first; to discern a path for the future, we must know the path by which we have come. But then the focus must shift, away from what has happened and is the case, to what *is to* happen and *will be* the case. The CNC is not appointed to decide which of the candidates *has been* the best archdeacon or parish priest. It is there to discover which of the candidates *will be* the right bishop of the diocese for the next few years.

The Holy Spirit leads and guides Christ's church. It is the task of those who nominate bishops to follow that leading. But to follow God's leading is to go somewhere new, not just to apply a familiar formula. Of course, no one can detect God's leading who has not first learned to recognise God's work in experience. But God is the lord of the future, "calling into existence things that do not exist", as St. Paul says (Rom. 4:17), and making bishops out of those who have not been bishops. Members of the CNC have to hold their minds open to the possibility of finding a bishop they never thought of or heard of before.

This discernment is not a private one, but has to be reached by fourteen people who have a common faith but different angles of vision. Together they undertake this journey of exploration, no one of them knowing the end from the beginning. When members arrive at a CNC with their minds made up, their preferred bishop already selected, then the process becomes very difficult.

The CNC thus requires a different approach from other tasks that Synod may commonly ask its members to do. Some tasks require tough negotiators, some an ability to argue and push hard questions of principle. This requires something different: an imagination that picks up well on other people's meanings, a patience that can wait on the Holy Spirit to make a murky picture clearer. The people who do this task must know where they come from and where they are going, and hold their convictions deeply; but they must also be essentially cooperative, good at finding common paths. They need to be good at understanding people - the candidates, on the one hand, their fellow-members on the other, and able to cope good-humouredly with styles and approaches that strike them as simply absurd. The kind of person who wants to take every question back to first principles, and looks for an early closure on every debate, is not going to fare well in this role.

Central members acquire experience and knowledge, which puts them in a position of some advantage in relation to the diocesan members, who are almost always new to the task. So they need to be people who will use their advantage constructively to help the other participants to make the process effective. They will want to achieve a good result, to be sure; but they will want to achieve it, wherever possible, through a genuine consensus of mutual understanding.

All of which is demanding enough. But then they also need to be representative, acting on behalf of the whole church. Professor Ludlow will take up that aspect of the matter now.

Professor Ludlow

Professor O'Donovan has just spoken about the task of discerning which candidate is called to be bishop of a particular see; he has emphasised that this discernment is not a private exercise, but rather a discernment of the whole church. So, it follows that this discernment has to be made by a body – the CNC – which represents the Church as a whole.

What does this mean? It means that together the elected CNC members should be able to bring the whole life and vision of the church to bear on the process of discernment. They will be able to bring a wide range of experiences and contributions with them – and to be able sympathetically to express the perspectives of others in the church. They will need to be able to engage imaginatively with the needs of the diocese and of the wider church.

We do recognise that the diverse approaches and traditions within the life of the Church of England have led to the formation of various organized groups in Synod. If an elected member of the CNC comes from a particular grouping, she is likely to come to the task of discernment from a certain perspective; her views will have a certain kind of foundation. Indeed, all people involved in a process of discernment will start from a particular place: that is part of what it is to be human. The task of the CNC members is to build out from that foundation, opening themselves and their particular perspectives up to the prompting of the Spirit, so that they can work together to discern God's vision for the church. Your task, as Synod members electing members of the CNC is to discern who will open to such vision. You are not choosing them to represent particular groups as such, but to represent the whole church, without forgetting the particular traditions and perspectives which have formed them as members of the church.

We heard moving testimony from several people who voiced the view – with some reason – that their concerns were not being represented by the CNC as well as they could be – by which I mean as fully and as imaginatively as they could be. There is a possible reason for this: that is, the idea that the CNC should be representative of various groupings in Synod has come to overshadow the idea that the CNC is representative of the whole Church.

Synod is of course the body by which and from which the central CNC representatives will be elected. But CNC members are called to represent the whole church; so, they are called to represent members of the Church of England whose concerns and perspectives do not map on to particular synod groupings. If the Church of England were composed entirely of people whose Anglican identity was defined by where they came from, Synod could simply choose one representative for each region. But Christianity and the church of England is not as simple as that and one could not come up with a mathematically-fair way of ensuring that all interest groups were represented on one CNC. This is why CNC members are called to engage imaginatively with a whole range of

concerns which they will understand – from their depth of experience on General Synod – to be concerns of members of the Church.

A CNC with members who share a common understanding of representing the whole church and the vision to look forward in the process of discernment will be able to work together. They will be able to work with each other, with the Archbishop in the chair, and with the candidates, drawing them also into a process of shared discernment, to which they are a crucial party.

We do recognise, however, that the task of the CNC is a difficult and an exposed one. In our conversations over the last months, we have heard that trust has sometimes become strained. It is important that members of the CNC trust one another and that they are trusted by the church – including the candidates – to carry out their task. It is the task of Synod, when approaching the election of CNC members, to choose members who are not only worthy of trust, but who will work together to build trust throughout the process of discernment.

Reflecting theologically on the notion of trust, we noted that in the thought-world of the New Testament, trust, confidence and faith are often expressed by the same word: *pistis*. *Pistis* is a concept about relationships. It expresses our faith or trust in God; it also expresses the way in which God entrusts individuals with certain callings – like being a bishop – and entrusts the church with certain tasks – like discerning who should be bishop of where. By grace, we are related to God in trust and this comes before our relationships with our neighbours. Our human relationships can only become trusting if they are sustained by a faithful relationship with God.

The success of the CNC require a degree of trust and confidence that those entrusted with the task will put the interests of the whole church - both local and national - ahead of any sectional agendas. You need to have confidence that the CNC members represent the whole church; you need to be confident that they will participate in a corporate process of discernment.

The task of being a CNC member involves personal maturity, fortitude and integrity; these can only be found in those who are prayerfully open to the Spirit as they approach the task. When this is not possible, the whole church suffers; when it is, there may be both surprising and enriching results.

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