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**Press release.** Issued by the Catholic Communications Network

### **Archbishop's Commitment to Christian Unity**

The Most Rev Bernard Longley, Archbishop of Birmingham and Co-Chairman of ARCIC III shares his thoughts and hopes for a new chapter in ecumenical dialogue. ARCIC stands for Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission. Archbishop Longley travels to Bose, a monastery in northern Italy, (17 May 2011), for the first meeting of ARCIC III.

*What is ARCIC III and why was it set-up?*

ARCIC III is the third phase of the international dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church. It originally began in response to the Second Vatican Council and as a result of the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Michael Ramsey, to Pope Paul VI in 1966.

Archbishop Ramsey and Pope Paul issued a joint statement at that time speaking of "a new stage in the development of fraternal relations" and this vision has been a characteristic of the ARCIC dialogue ever since.

ARCIC III takes as its mandate the meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Rowan Williams in 2006 when they committed our two communions to continue the dialogue.

*What particular areas of work have the Holy Father and Archbishop of Canterbury asked ARCIC III to study?*

The Holy Father and the Archbishop asked ARCIC III to "address the important issues involved in the emerging ecclesiological and ethical factors making that journey more difficult and arduous".

In other words ARCIC III is being asked to reflect on the nature of the Church as understood by Anglicans and Catholics and to consider the way that the Church arrives at authoritative teaching, especially about moral issues.

On that basis ARCIC III will look at two connected areas of theology: the Church as Communion, local and universal and how in communion the local and universal Church come to discern right ethical teaching.

*What is on the agenda for your first meeting in Bose?*

This first meeting of ARCIC III lasts for some ten days and since it is the first time that this particular group of bishops and theologians will be meeting our first task is to come to know each other, to understand our backgrounds and range of expertise and to spend time together in prayer and reflection on the Scriptures.

All of this will enable us to begin the task of dialogue that has been entrusted to us. Over the course of the days we shall receive and discuss a number of papers already commissioned from the members of the dialogue group and begin to shape the pattern of our future meetings.

We will reflect carefully on the mandate we have received so as to understand its full scope and to plan a fitting strategy for this phase of ARCIC's work.

*Where is Bose and why was it chosen as the place to host the meeting?*

Bose is a monastery in northern Italy and the monks there come from a variety of Christian traditions. The monastic community is dedicated to the search for Christian unity and supports the Churches' efforts by prayer and by offering hospitality in the Benedictine tradition.

For these reasons it is a very fitting place to begin this third phase of ARCIC's work and it will provide a place of peaceful calm where we can listen carefully to one another and seek inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

*What are your hopes for this first meet of the new Commission?*

I hope that we can imitate what the very first phase of ARCIC sought to do - that is to explore our ecclesial relationships in the context of coming to know one another as ARCIC III members, to absorb collectively our ecumenical history and to build a common understanding of the method of our theological dialogue.

These aims will be a challenge to the twenty or so participants gathered at Bose and I hope that we can establish ourselves as a cohesive group that is confident in approaching the difficult issues within our relations in a creative and positive fashion.

ARCIC III working to specific timetables and when do you expect to publish your first report and what will it be about?

We have deliberately not set ourselves an overall timetable for this phase of ARCIC ahead of our meeting. We need first to assess the scope of our work and to decide its pattern before gauging the length of the overall process.

There will be interim reports on our work, following each meeting and when required by the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Anglican Communion Office.

It is worth noting that the first two phases of ARCIC stretched over more than a decade each, so it would be unwise to try to predict how long ARCIC III will last.

*What particular skills and gifts will you bring as the Catholic Co-Chairman and are you looking forward to the work?*

I am very much looking forward to our working together on this new phase of ARCIC. I believe my seven years as a national ecumenical officer for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in the mid-1990s and my consequent involvement as an observer on the Church of England's Council for Christian Unity gave me some insights that will be of enormous help with ARCIC's work.

I think my nine years teaching Dogmatic Theology (ecclesiology and sacraments) at St John's Seminary, Wonersh will also be invaluable to the task I have as Co-Chairman of ARCIC.

I am currently the Catholic Co-Chairman of the English Anglican-Roman Catholic Committee, our national dialogue group, and it will be of great interest to serve these two dialogues in tandem.

By happy coincidence I knew Archbishop David Moxon, the Anglican Co-Chairman of ARCIC III, when we were both undergraduates in Oxford in the 1970s and it is good to

renew our friendship in this ecumenical context.

*When ARCIC I and ARCIC II were set-up there were high hopes that full visible unity between the Catholic Church and Anglican Communion might be possible one day. Since then the Anglican Communion has ordained women as priests and bishops and put an insurmountable block in the way to full unity. So what is the point of ARCIC III?*

The climate in which ARCIC III is working is very different from that of ARCIC I or ARCIC II and yet the ultimate aim must remain the same. Both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion are committed to working and praying for the full, visible unity of the Church and we see ARCIC as contributing to that end.

Of course, we must face the obstacles that make that journey much more difficult. This phase of ARCIC will recognise the impact of the actions of some Anglican Provinces which have raised the issue of the nature of communion within the Church. We hope ARCIC III can make a contribution to resolving some of the issues that seem so intractable a present.

*Is it envisaged that ARCIC III go over or redo any of the papers prepared by ARCIC I and ARCIC II?*

ARCIC III has been given responsibility for gathering together the work of ARCIC II and reflecting on the various processes of reception that have greeted its reports.

It is recognised that there is still considerable work to be done in relation to the reception of ARCIC II but also that ARCIC III's priority must be the new task of theological dialogue on communion and discerning right ethical teaching.

*Do you have any particular points that you would like to make to priests, deacons, religious and lay-faithful in England and Wales about the work of ARCIC III and Christian Unity in general?*

As the members of ARCIC III assemble this week in Bose for the first time I would ask for the prayers of the priests, deacons, religious and lay-faithful in all our dioceses in England and Wales.

Ecumenical dialogue has been going through a difficult period but this new beginning for ARCIC indicates the steadfast commitment of the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion to searching for deeper and fuller communion in response to the prayer of our Lord that they all may be one.

The Holy Father's visit to us last September, his Beatification of Blessed John Henry Newman and the time that he spent with Archbishop Rowan Williams were an enormous encouragement as we undertake this new phase of ARCIC's work.