

## **The Commonwealth and the Jubilee**

### **Mimmo Muolo**

First of all, a clarification. I will not proceed with a systematic treatment. That would be impossible in this place and in the given time.

Above all, mine will be the proposal of some notes, grouped by topic, that come from my more than thirty years of experience as a Vatican journalist and that I hope can offer opportunities for further study.

I will start from an event that dates back 25 years ago now and that, if you look closely, works as a litmus test of our theme, as well as a hub for the in-depth studies mentioned.

#### **The Holy Door of 2000**

We are in a Jubilee climate and so it seems right to me to start from January 18, 2000, as part of the Great Jubilee of the change of millennium, celebrated by Saint John Paul II according to the mandate received from Cardinal Wyszyński already in the Sistine Chapel at the time of his election, "You will introduce the Church into the third millennium". On that day, January 18, 2000, the Holy Door of the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls was opened. An event and date with strong ecumenical implications. Because January 18 is always the start date of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which ends on January 25, the Conversion of Saint Paul. And because it was not only Pope Wojtyła who opened that Holy Door, but also George Carey, at the time Archbishop of Canterbury and Anglican Primate, as well as Metropolitan Athanasius, representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Twenty-two Christian leaders were also present, along with representatives of the World Council of Churches, which represents 337 denominations.

Why is this event important in itself and also in the context of our theme today?

The answer is simple. And it lies in a word that is the first of the notes in my little contribution: ECUMENISM.

#### **Jubilee and ecumenism**

The Holy Year is an eminently Catholic event. Born in 1300, therefore two and a half centuries after the Eastern Schism, it was indirectly the cause - due to the trade in indulgences - of the other great schism in the history of the Church, that of Martin Luther in the 16th century. It is therefore clear that five hundred years later, the opening of a holy door by six hands, four of which were non-Catholic, is a historical event.

When we talk about the Jubilee and the Commonwealth, the ecumenical component of the discussion is absolutely not secondary. On the contrary.

That event of 25 years ago, not repeated this year on 5 January when the holy door of St. Paul Outside the Walls was opened again, remains a milestone in the ecumenical journey in general and in the ecumenical relations between the Vatican and Canterbury in particular.

We can consider this journey, like all other ecumenical relations, as a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. It all started in March 1966, almost sixty years ago, when Pope Paul VI and the then Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey expressed their intention to inaugurate a dialogue "based on the Gospels and ancient common traditions". What has happened in these six decades? A joint statement from the Anglican and Catholic bishops of 27 countries who participated in the ecumenical event Growing together that took place in Rome and Canterbury, from 22 to 29 January 2024, as part of

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the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which is always a thermometer for measuring bilateral relations between the different Churches and therefore also between the Catholic and Anglican Churches, tells us. The text says: “After four centuries of conflict and separation, the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion have now been on the path towards reconciliation for almost sixty years. At times the path has been bumpy, but the Holy Spirit has been at work and our churches have persevered in a dialogue that has proved extraordinarily fruitful”.

Here is a first fixed point. A bumpy path (one can recall the rifts regarding the ordination of women or openly homosexual men and the question relating to those Anglican priests who have asked to be readmitted into the Catholic Church), but the dialogue continues and the friendship continues. And that this has also been witnessed by the joint opening of a holy door (as well as by the frequent meetings between the last three Pontiffs and the last archbishops of Canterbury – the latest in chronological order being the audience with Welby on 25 January 2024, now, as is known, the see is vacant following the resignation of the latter) is an circumstance of great value.

#### **Altar and throne**

A second chapter concerns the relations between the Holy See and the main State of the Commonwealth, the United Kingdom. Let us remember that, even if formally, the head of the Anglican Church is the British sovereign, supreme governor. The reciprocal relations have enjoyed good health for many decades now. Queen Elizabeth, in her long reign, has met four Popes (five if we add Pius XII when he was still the heir to the throne). In 1961 John XXIII, in 1980, 1982 and 2000 John Paul II (the first and third time in the Vatican), in 2010 Benedict XVI in Edinburgh and in 2014 Pope Francis in the Vatican. On all these occasions, the British sovereign has received papal attestations of appreciation and esteem, not only formal.

Therefore, the upcoming visit of King Charles III to Italy and the Vatican on 9 April fits into this context, even if the meeting with the Pope is at risk due to Francis's health conditions.

#### **The Popes' Travels**

The third and last note I leave you are the travels of the last four Pontiffs. Who have often trod the territory of the 56 States currently part of the Commonwealth. To be precise:

8 were the countries visited by Paul VI

33 those visited by John Paul II;

4 countries those touched by Benedict XVI;

and 9 by Francis.

In total it can be concluded that the great pilgrimage of contemporary Pontiffs in the world has crossed the territory and the populations of the Commonwealth 54 times. Populations not all with a Catholic majority, as is well known. A circumstance that leads me to conclude like this. The Jubilee, pilgrimage by definition and excellence, can be an opportunity to further strengthen the ecumenical, political and friendship relations between the Holy See and all these countries. And thus contribute to writing pages of peace in a world that especially today has a great need of it.