

# ENQUIRE WITHIN

**Question:** *I went to visit some Roman Catholic friends recently and although we are friends, they started teasing me, calling the Church of England the Church of "anything goes!" Is this fair? What should I have said in response?*

**Answer:** Well, I jest is a jest, of course, and I hope that this doesn't spoil your relationship with your friends!

There is an issue here, of course, for in this light-hearted jest is perhaps a kernel of what is so different between the insights which the Roman Catholic Church has garnered and cherished as a result of the controversies of the past 400 or so years and what the Church of England has garnered and decided to cherish.

You have to remember that in the Roman Catholic Church, the magisterium, or authority of the Church is taken very seriously. The Church has authority, for example, to forbid Roman Catholics from reading certain books. There is a list of books which Roman Catholics were, until 1948, banned from reading. The list still exists although in 1966, ecclesiastical penalties were finally withdrawn from those ignoring the ban.

In a nut-shell, that expresses the difference between the RC and the C of E Churches. The RC Church believes that it has the authority to demand obedience from its members, in a variety of other matters.

In areas such as medical ethics, RC members must agree with the church's rules or face some form of disciplinary action against them. In the past, this discipline included being excommunicated from the fellowship of the Church, torture, and extreme punishment, and, of course, even death. The aim of such punishments was to rid the church of wrong influences which could harm other church members.

In the Church of England, there has been a long and sometimes tortuous development of another approach. This approach is marked by a delicate and awkward balancing act. Those coming to make up their minds on

ethical or doctrinal matters are invited to take into account three strands:

**1) the witness of the Bible**, although here, we always need to exercise caution because the Bible often requires some scholarly attributes to tease out the real meaning;

**2) the teachings of the church** down the ages through which many scholars, thinkers, and indeed saints, have contributed to the debate and some with great wisdom and insight. Yet sometimes they differ, so how can we balance the differences?



**3) the conscience of the individual**, which is called to discern what is the truth or the nearest thing to the right way of thinking that it can. The conscience of the individual, when informed by the Bible and the teachings of the Church

may eventually arrive at a proper decision!

The C of E route is one that demands deep levels of patience and a high degree of maturity in deciding areas where it is possible to disagree and remain within the same Church, rather than make the effort of cleansing the church of heresy or difference.

For a Roman Catholic, these issues may live in their minds or even their conversations, but ultimately, if the Pope declares what is the truth in the mind of the Church, then the matter is decided and debate is irrelevant and also unwelcome. Indeed, there has been pressure on RC people openly discussing the ordination of women as priests, a demand for silence and toeing the line.

Sadly this attitude is very reminiscent of the silence surrounding the protection of those RC priests who abused children but the church thought it better to say nothing. Silencing debate is wrong.

The Church of England is the Church of Anything may be discussed, not the Church of Anything goes!

Neil Richardson