

Anglicans, Catholics still differ on Mary: What is an acceptable diversity of belief

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Two years after Anglican and Roman Catholic priests and theologians said they had reached a common understanding on the Virgin Mary, there's still something about the Catholic doctrine of Mary that doesn't sit right with some Anglicans. Specifically, some Anglicans remain skittish about Catholic dogmas on the immaculate conception (that Jesus' mother was born free of original sin) and the assumption (that she was "assumed body and soul" into heaven at the end of her life).

During the October 18-20 meeting of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation in the USA at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Episcopal and Catholic leaders said the 2005 written agreement is "significant" but could have done more to ease Anglican concerns about Catholic teaching.

"As a group, we did not find the document entirely satisfactory," a statement from the meeting said, noting that "our greatest points of discussion and contention" were over the two dogmas about Mary.

Anglicans generally have two concerns about the twin dogmas:

- Both were proclaimed as infallible by popes (the immaculate conception in 1854 and the assumption in 1950). Anglicans, who split from Rome 500 years ago, question the power of the pope to make such beliefs mandatory.
- Neither dogma is explicitly referenced in scripture. "Only that which can be read in scripture or proved on the basis of scripture can be believed," the U.S. statement said.

There are also lingering cultural and historical questions surrounding the mother of Jesus, said Episcopal bishop Christopher Epting, who oversees his church's ecumenical outreach.

“Historically, Catholics have a very high view of Mary,” while Anglicans traditionally place less emphasis on Mary’s role, Epting said. Not to mention the misunderstandings on both sides: “There are Protestants who think Catholics worship Mary,” he noted

In the 2005 statement, both sides said the immaculate conception and the assumption are “consonant” with scripture, even if they’re not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. It also said Anglicans might not need to accept both doctrines since Anglicans and Catholics were separate churches when the dogmas were proclaimed.

That question—what Anglicans would have to believe as part of full communion with the Catholic Church—deserves more explanation, the ecumenists said. “What might be an acceptable diversity of belief in a reconciled church, particularly with regard to doctrines that . . . the churches have not shared?” the statement asks.

Ronald Roberson, a Catholic priest who is a consultant to the dialogue, said the sides could agree on principles without getting bogged down in specifics. “This would not necessarily mean we’d have to use the same words,” he said. *—Religion News Service*