

Pentecost XVI  
September 20, 2009  
Fr. Dow Sanderson

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A month or two ago, a feature story on the Church of the Holy Communion ran in the local paper. It was a good article, sharing with the larger public the heart and ministry of this fine congregation.

There was one quote in the article, however, that raised a few eyebrows among some of our fellow priests in the Diocese of South Carolina. The quote was: *At every point at which the English Reformation departed from the Catholic Faith of the ages, the English Reformation was in error.*

It seems a simple enough statement. And yet, I am told, some of the younger clergy of the diocese were amazed. If I were a cheekier fellow, I would have replied to them, *Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me?*

I made precisely the same statement in an article I wrote the parish in 2001. We boldly proclaim as much, not only on the *World Wide Web*, but Sunday by Sunday and day by day. It is why Anglo-Catholicism exists. It is why this parish was founded. And it is the witness we have made for 150 years.

Now, before I say more. Let me explain that I am tackling this issue this morning, because I think that it is helpful in light of today's congregational meeting. As we seek to understand better our relationship to the diocese, to the American Province, and to the Anglican Communion, it seems to me that restating our local mission and ministry is a good idea.

So just a few reminders, hopefully, without belaboring the point...

As you know, the English Reformation was unlike that on the continent. Henry VIII disliked Luther immensely, and had written a treatise against the Protestant Reformation, for which he was given the title *Defender of the Faith* by the Pope. His issues were political, not theological.

After his death, his son Edward, being but a child, was a figure-head king only. Forces sympathetic to more radical change began to enable those changes. It was during this time that the earliest Books of Common Prayer were written. The first, in 1549 was quite a fine achievement...the Catholic Faith in English. But the Protestant sympathizers did not like it at all... and so a much more extreme version was put forward.

Young Edward died before much of the reform could take hold, and his half-sister Mary brought England back under Roman obedience.

At her death, Elizabeth I, sensing that the country was weary of religious conflict, attempted a *middle way* a *via media* that was intended to satisfy as many as possible.

The “genius” of the compromise, if it can be called that, is that there was strict observance of outward conformity, but wide latitude in beliefs.

In other words, a Traditionalist read the prayerbook words and understood Real Presence. A Reformationist read the same words and believed otherwise! Strict conformity in what was said... wide latitude in what it meant.

What was the fruit of this comprehensive church? Beheadings. Burnings at the stake. Civil War. Regicide.

Time and again, there were attempts to win the soul of the Church of England.

There was the Evangelical Revival of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

And the Catholic Revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

And as you know, basically three “parties” have existed ever since in the Anglican Church.

The Evangelicals or “low churchmen” have always emphasized solidarity with the Continental Reformers. For the sake of argument (although it is something of an oversimplification) we can say that the Evangelicals believe that the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was the most important epoch in all Christian history. Nothing that came before was as important. Nothing that came after was as important. The church before the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was corrupt. And the Reformation corrected the abuse. Most Anglican Evangelicals have deep reverence for the theology of the Swiss Reformer John Calvin. And in their worship and teaching, they often interpret the prayerbook and the 39 Articles through the filter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. St. Michael’s and St. Philip’s, Charleston, and St. Helena’s Beaufort are good examples of Evangelical parishes today.

You have also heard of “broad churchmen.” They are harder to describe because they are... well.. broad! Some are fairly conservative in holding historic, orthodox Christian beliefs... they simply do not wish to have those beliefs precisely explained or defined. *Let the liturgy and the creeds speak for themselves. They do not need commentary, catechism or confessional documents to support them.* Grace Church, Charleston, is a fairly representative Broad Church parish.

But of course, with that kind of latitude, more liberal beliefs are also possible. At the extreme end of the Broad Church spectrum, the historic teachings of the Church are often

seen merely as allegory and metaphor. *The resurrection didn't have to **happen**... it just has to **inspire us!*** (Thank you Bishop Spong).

Finally there are the Anglo Catholics. (When we get to write the history, we always see ourselves as the finished product, I suppose. So "finally" is just fine with me!)

When John Keble and John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey looked at the English Church, they saw that some of its treasures were hidden. They hadn't been *abolished*, exactly, it was simply that no one had used them in generations.

The Apostolic Succession was intact... even if nobody took it very seriously. The Catholic Sacraments and Creeds were right there in the prayerbook, even if most people had not been taught their true meaning.

Far from thinking that the Reformation produced a finished product, they saw it as a great tragedy! And they set about writing and teaching and preaching, hoping to inspire the whole church. The Church of England was not just the Government's Religion Department! It was the Bride of Christ. The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church! Rather than emphasizing the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation, they sought rather to show continuity with the Church of antiquity. *We ARE the Church founded by Jesus Christ. We DO have an unbroken heritage all the way to the upper room. We are not a different Church than the one that Pope Gregory sent missionaries to in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, we are the SAME church.*

The little analogy I have used a few times is this: Imagine that you had a brother who took a "lick" on the head and forgot who he was. And just suppose that, before his injury, he had been a virtuoso violinist. Wouldn't you use all of your efforts to take him from a life on aimless wanderings and restore him to his full potential?

Well, as daunting as the task, that is what Anglo-Catholics have always tried to do... to restore the *potential* to the whole Church.

The English priest on the last Century Colin Stevenson has a wonderful little quote in his book Merrily on High: *There was a time when we actually thought that we could convert all of England to the Catholic Faith. We were wrong of course, but what fun we had!*

Well dare I say that our task in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is even hard than was Fr. Stevenson's in the 1930s! The patient has developed more and more amnesia! (And it is no longer nearly as much fun!)

And, of course, there are some who no longer have the stomach for the task. Earlier this month, an entire convent of Anglican nuns, together with their chaplain, Fr. Warren Tanghe (a long time friend and colleague) were received into the Roman Catholic Church. We honor those whose consciences dictate that they cannot stay. (There have been times I have been tempted to go with them...two weeks in Italy have that effect!)

But I am confident that we have been called in this place to a particular vocation. We have the opportunity to teach the Catholic Faith **right here** to people who would **otherwise never know of it**. The hand of Providence has so clearly been on this anointed little church and has brought it through too many adversities to believe that He does not have a plan for its continued witness.

And so we will keep the light burning. And we will joyfully and faithfully proclaim what we have always believed. To some, it may seem that to do so is folly. Don Quixote (with his curates) chasing one last windmill....

But just as Ezekiel's valley of dry bones sprang to life... and just as surely as that little band of disciples brought forth the fruit of the Catholic Church... with God all things are possible.

*For we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, brethren, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.*

It is hard work. It is blessed work. And we are more than well equipped to do it.

Amen+++