

## ***THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH***

*Sermon by Canon Michael Birch*

It was suggested that I might wish to share with you some thoughts on our proposed state of Communion with the Holy See. It has been a difficult journey for me from the first day of the offer to the place where I have come to now.

A man came to Jesus and asked him to heal his son. (*Mark 9:24*) Jesus responded that except you see signs and wonders you will not believe. The man in anguish cried out, 'Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.' Let us learn from this event.

We have set before us an amazing offer by the Roman Pontiff to bring about a degree of unity in the Church which has not been seen since the sixteenth century. Not a perfect unity, of course. Far, far from it. For all that, it is a declaration that, even if we human beings cannot achieve the unity which Christ desires for his Church, we *wish* that we could, and we repent of the evil which has rent asunder the Churches of Christ.

There are, of course, a number of things which stand in the way of our accepting this offer to unite ourselves with the Roman See. One of the obstacles is pride. We are *Anglican*, and in no way a second fiddle to Rome. Indeed, in the eyes of many Anglicans, we are superior; superior in Liturgy, in the pureness of our scriptural approach to doctrine, properly reformed from the excesses of a Medieval Church which many believe Rome is still. This is a very difficult obstacle to overcome. It is very difficult for me, as I have no desire to become a Roman Catholic, although I'm not entirely sure what I mean when I think or say that. I think what I mean is that I want to remain an Anglican, be an Anglican. I think that, wrong as I may be, I feel that Anglicanism *is* a superior form of the expression of the Church than Rome is. I don't know why I think that either. For it is blatantly untrue. *Neither* is the Body of Christ without the *other*, that is the truth, and that is the truth whether we are joined under one supreme pontiff or not. Pride goeth before a fall, says the Scripture. (*Prov. 16:18*) "He giveth grace to the humble," (*James 4:6*) wrote St. James. We shall look in a moment or two at a wonderful example of humility in the example of St. Chad.

Another concern which gives us pause for concern is that of Marian Doctrine, and specifically the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Our Lady into heaven. These last two are specific problems for some because they were not actual dogmas until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, and Anglicans have tended toward the position that you can accept these as truth or simply accept them as a sort of folk religion, but not as necessary to be believed for eternal salvation. If you are one who has problems with these things (as I do!) remember this: *our* Church has accepted these things all along, and celebrates all the Marian festivals every year. Even the Anglican Communion has collects and readings appointed in one Prayer Book or another for all of the Marian festivals. It will make very little difference to your spiritual or church life what you think of them; things will not change for you. There will be no Marian police coming around issuing fines or writs of excommunication after joining Rome through an Ordinariate. Even the Pope has said of The Assumption that it is a Spiritual Truth rather than a physical manifestation. You might be interested to know that these beliefs are also not Roman Catholic in origin; they began in the Eastern Churches in the third and fourth century for the one and the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century for the other, and are made much more of a fuss over in the Orthodox communities than in the Roman west. What needs to be remembered about these things is that The Blessed Virgin is the type of the Church, the New Eve, the helpmeet of the Lord. It is the *Church* which is immaculately conceived, foreshadowed in Mary and formed as Eve was formed from Adam, for The Church's Divine creation can be seen when the Roman soldier opens Christ's side with a spear; it is the Church which will be raised to heaven, a new wonder, a woman with twelve stars etc. as expressed in the Book of Revelation (*Rev. 12:1*) foreshadowed in Mary's "assumption." If we divorce the mysteries associated with our Lady from the Church, then we are nothing more than a sect exalting Mary; if we express them as a foreshadowing of the Church, the true Eve, then we are exalting the Church, the Bride of Christ, whose members severally we are. Do not fret about what has often been perceived as Roman belief and practice; *we* are called to bear our *Anglican* witness to all this.

Another perceived stumbling block is the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Some of you have actually *read* it; others simply like to criticize what they think they know about it; they would not actually want to *read* it. The bishops of the TAC have signed off on it; whether we accept Rome's offer or not, the Catechism of the Catholic Church is the standard presentation of the faith as far as our Episcopate is concerned. Where does this leave you and me? Well, committed to it, I suppose. But remember this: at any given time what the *Church* believes ideally is the whole truth; what *you or I* believe at any given time may actually differ from that in a slight or greater way. In the Roman Catholic Church, there are almost as many beliefs as there are people. Well, perhaps that's a stretch. But you can be assured that they are about as individualistic about their faith as Anglicans have been. What is important is that the Faith, the Catholic Faith, must be maintained by the Church. As for the rest of us, we must pray to God to give us the understanding we need to grasp and hold that faith. "Now we see through a glass darkly," wrote St. Paul, "but then we shall know even as we are known." And when is that? When the Lord Jesus returns, and we see clearly all the mysteries of God. It is not that we *cannot* know them now; it is that we *will* not know them now. But even here in this life the Church will have contact with that which is to be, so that we will tend to the truth and not to error. So what if you cannot understand or believe every tenet of faith? Do you believe in those articles of faith expounded in the Creeds? Then welcome to the Christ's Holy Catholic Church. The rest will follow as it should, in God's good time.

Some of the clergy (and a few of the laity also, I imagine) are concerned that our priests and bishops will not be accepted as *real* priests and bishops, but will have to undergo some form of re-ordination or conditional ordination. That is true. But we have also been told that this is for the quieting of Roman Catholic consciences. They have been told for generations that our Orders are not valid. Yet their theologians are not at all sure that that is so. So what is being said is basically this: It is not in our power to state at this time that former Anglican Orders were in fact valid. And the Anglican Communion at this present time has so distorted the Sacrament of Ordination as to make it impossible to accept priests directly into the priesthood as we really are not sure what their Orders consist of. On the other hand, we believe that Anglican Orders in times before the Ordination of Women were most certainly validly exercised as far as Anglicans are concerned. When you celebrated the Mass, it was a valid Mass, and valid Communion, valid Absolution etc.. However, in order to make sure that our Roman Catholic people are able without qualms to accept your priestly ministry in our new arrangement, we ask that you accept from us whatever seems necessary to allow you to function within the wider framework of the Catholic Church. However, whenever we are asked to give our date of Ordination, we will give the date of our *Anglican* Ordination, for that is when we were ordained. This calls for the humility of which I spoke earlier.

I was greatly touched by a reading given at Tuesday's Mass from the Venerable Bede's *History of the English Church and People*. He was writing about St. Chad. King Alhfrith had sent the priest Wilfrid overseas to be consecrated a bishop. Wilfrid was detained for a great time, and so another King, Oswy, sent the priest Chad to Canterbury to be consecrated. Finding that the Archbishop had died, he went to the province of the West Saxons, and was consecrated by Bishop Wine, assisted by two British bishops. When Wilfrid finally returned, Theodore of Tarsus, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, was asked to adjudicate over who should be the bishop. He looked at the facts before him, and finally told Chad that he found his Consecration to be 'irregular'. Chad's response needs, I think, to be my response to such a similar situation: "If you believe that my consecration as bishop was irregular, I willingly resign the office, for I have never thought myself worthy of it. Although unworthy, I accepted it solely under obedience." The response was quick; Theodore assured him that he did not have to give up his office, and proceeded to complete his Consecration according to Catholic rites, to make up whatever he thought was missing.

This humility is to be found in our own Primate and our married bishops, who have all declared that they will gladly give up the Episcopal office if that is what is required; they will not cling to what at any rate is not theirs except by God's gift. It is better for the Church of God to move forward down this path, they have said, than that we should wear the purple.

Over and over again it has been stressed that we are not asked to become Roman Catholics. Our Ordinaries will have the same kind of authority as the Roman Bishops, and will not be subservient to them. We will be Anglicans in Communion with Rome rather than Anglicans in Communion with Canterbury. For most of us, we will probably notice very little difference. For we will simply be Christians doing Christian things in the same Catholic way that we have always claimed, and looking for that wonderful day when Christ shall be all in all.

The only thing that really holds us back is fear. If I were 18, filled as I was with the fearless impetuosity of youth *and* a wisdom beyond my years, I would be jumping at the chance. As it is, I am hesitant. But this is an invitation to a new journey in Christ; as he has been my light and salvation so he will continue. Whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid? Come out tonight, and listen to our Primate, who has worked tirelessly to accomplish that which the Anglican Communion longed to do, but could not achieve. And may we be unto our Primate a support, making his ministry joyous, rather than a stiff-necked people lost in a false pride. Our English brethren have voted to start the journey; our American brethren also. Will we walk with them, or will they go alone?