

Epiphany IV

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Yesterday was the anniversary of the consecration of Bishop Morse and two other men to form a continuing Anglican religious body in North America. On our calendar, the day is called “The Preservation of the American Episcopate”. I think that name and the whole project of constructing and trying to support an Orthodox Christian body in the Anglican tradition in North America is worth some consideration. We do not speak about this very often, thinking that our time is better spent in supporting what is positive in Christian life rather than in examining differences of opinion or groups of people who have basic disagreements with the Christian Tradition, but from time to time we ought to reflect on what it is that we are really trying to do, as a group, and what our reasons for doing so really are. (Before we go on I ought to say that, for every Christian, the living of a good life in the presence of God is so much more important than any other consideration that it almost blocks our view of this kind of question. The only reason why this kind of ecclesiological question is worth spending time on at all is because it does have, in very important ways, the ability to disrupt or even to prevent us from pursuing the religious life in the way we ought to. We ought to realize that this topic is important only in the context of that support of good Christian living.)

In the very beginning, the followers of Jesus grew as an organized body in the world, both inside and outside the bounds of the Roman Empire. It is not true that only those who were evangelized and baptized by the organized Christian body were accepted as Christians. The Book of Acts shows us that this is not the case. However, it is true that as soon as individuals and groups of people outside of the single, physical body of the Church were discovered, they were quickly recognized as brothers and sisters and folded into the parent body. This process shows that a very strong desire for the unity of the Church was accompanied by a recognition of the fact that identification as a Christian was, in the deepest sense, determined by a person’s relationship with God not by a person’s membership in any organization that human beings could identify on Earth. Accepting believers from outside the Church’s bounds proves that, very clearly.

For centuries in the West, this kind of question of the nature of the Church was almost impossible to ask since the Christian body that was known in Europe was completely unified and centered on Rome and because that body had a very important social and legal presence that often overshadowed its religious nature. At the time of the Reformation, when religious questions of the most basic kind could be asked again in the West, Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, began to reflect on the nature of the Church as they experienced it and what the nature of the Church really ought to be, in the abstract and in the ideal case. It will be no surprise to you to discover that

the people who were members of the Roman Catholic body centered on Rome tended to come to the conclusion that membership in the identifiable physical body to which they belonged was the *sine qua non* of true Christian identity. Those who belonged to bodies made up of people who had broken away from the Roman jurisdiction, whether they had broken away as entire units like the Church in England or the Lutheran Church in Sweden, or whether they had broken away as individuals as the Calvinists tended to do, almost always came to the conclusion that it was an individual person's relationship with God that determined whether or not he was a true Christian. Much of the subsequent political history of Western Europe, and quite a bit of the nascent European understanding of human nature, springs directly from these reflections.

This brings us to a consideration of the Anglican Tradition. The Church in England was clearly, and still remains, a body which is not entirely like the Roman Catholic nor entirely like the gathered Calvinists. It has the Scripture and historical connection to the roots of Christianity that the Roman Catholic Church has, but it also has an appreciation for the centrality of the Holy Spirit and the religious life in creating Christian identity. At various times, either one or the other of these two poles has been dominant in the life of the Church in England. To a very large degree this has been because of the inescapable political importance of the Church of England due to its established place in the political and legal life of Great Britain. Because of this, it was only during the colonial period and, even then, only in a few of the colonies, that Anglicans in the United States have been taken up with the kinds of concerns that are still central in the imaginations of Anglicans in England. To my mind, this independent life has made it possible for Anglicans in the United States of America to have a freer opportunity to try to discover how to combine their ideals of religious life with their ideals of Church life. I do not mean by this that Anglicans in the United States of America have done a better job of making the Church what it ought to be than Anglicans in Great Britain have, for both groups have been as unsuccessful as all Christians have in all times and places, but it does mean that our difficulties have been of a different kind than the Church in England has known.

When the Episcopal Church in the United States of America began to suffer the internal disruptions that went along with the changes in society in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, this freedom from external restraint meant that the internal leaders of the Church were the only ones able to keep the body on track, both in terms of theological understanding and in terms of ecclesiastical structural discipline. Both of these areas could, of course, offer us several hours of discussion in which we would only touch the surface of the things that could be said, but I think it is sufficient to say that the kinds of disagreements in the Episcopal Church during that period were not those that have been recurrent in earlier ages. The desire on the part of many in the Church to step away from original Christian moral teachings and, even more importantly, original Christian theological basics meant that there was a struggle over both teaching and practice that any earlier age of Christians would have understood to be a choice between remaining inside the historic Christian continuum and stepping outside of it into an entirely different religious realm. The leadership of the Episcopal Church was partly unable and partly unwilling to prevent the group from making that step outside of traditional Christian faith and practice.

It was that aspect of these quarrels that led to the formation of a new group through

the consecration of three bishops in Denver in 1978. The fact that the Orthodox Anglican movement almost immediately split into three pieces over tiresomely pedestrian issues of governance and authority is a sign to me that, by themselves, the traditional understanding of Christian teaching and a desire to be in communion and continuity with the historical Church are not enough to make people behave themselves. Only willingness to do what is necessary to remain in the membership of a Christian religious body will allow individuals and local congregations to continue through all the bumps and disappointments that seem to be inescapable as a part of living in the world we know. The survival of theologically orthodox Christian bodies is only possible if their members are willing to subordinate their human desires for control and if they are willing to live alongside those who have convictions that differ from their own, even though they still fall within the spectrum of traditional Christian acceptability. We need to carefully distinguish between central points and peripheral ones.

The Feast of the Preservation of the American Episcopate is not a time at which we should congratulate ourselves for having accomplished our goal. The preservation of the American episcopate provides us only with an opportunity to live a good Christian life inside the historical continuum of the Christian Church and sacramental life. This will only be an occasion that deserves celebration if we make use of this opportunity to do just that. Every year, on the 28th of January, we are challenged again by being reminded of the fact that we actually have the opportunity to live good Christian lives under the wings of an historically constituted Christian body that is sacramentally connected to the 12 apostles of Christ. This is a great gift and a wonderful grace, but it only matters if we take advantage of it to fulfill its possibilities. This requires of us not only to show the willingness to study the Church's teachings, to understand its explanation of the world, and to enjoy its sacraments, it also requires of us the humility and selflessness to live together in close contact with other imperfect human beings. Many Christians over the last 2000 years have found this to be more difficult than they could manage and many Christians have never really tried to make it work. I think the Episcopal Church in the United States fell apart in the 1960s and 70s because such a large part of its membership was unwilling to subordinate its own desires for novelty and control to historic Christian understanding and unwilling to put up with the presence of people with whom they disagreed. Our Christian body, the Anglican Province of Christ the King, will only be a truer incarnation of Christian reality if we can have more success at doing the same, very simple things. We are not a better group because we have independent life but our independent life offers us the opportunity to be a better group. Let us make use of this yearly reminder to feel that call more firmly and put it into action both in our hearts and in our deeds.