

Is the Church of England a "Church"?



We are not supposed to think of the Church of England as a 'Church'. When our sovereign was crowned, the Scriptures were placed in her hands with an awesome pronouncement: "We present you with this book, the most valuable thing this world affords."

This sentiment always prompts in me the response that the most valuable thing this world affords must rather be the Blessed Sacrament. But I nevertheless find the words moving to the point of tears. They inspire in me a deep wonder, and a gratitude not only for the Queen herself but for her religious office and the Church whose government she was anointed to bear.

But we are not supposed, apparently, to think of the Church of England as a "Church". Just an "ecclesial community", which has neither apostolic succession nor true sacraments. The declaration that Anglican sacraments are "absolutely null and utterly void" is a teaching which, according to a 1998 instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is to be "held definitively". Among a certain Catholic demographic this view has translated into an accomplished disdain for Anglicanism.

Lately, I heard one young man refer gleefully to a recently transitioned Ordinariate church as the long-overdue reappropriation of what is "ours"; another said that he did not bother to go into Anglican churches as they were "empty". Often such sentiments are expressed with an evident satisfaction at the increasingly fragmented condition of the Anglican Communion: definitive proof that without a Pope there is no Church. Whatever did they expect?

Presumably such people are going to feel particularly triumphant this week as the Anglican Communion flounders to the next stage in its long civil war. I find such Catholic Schadenfreude distressing and embarrassing.

This is not only because so many of the theologians who have inspired me are Anglican, nor because their meticulous care of this nation's religious heritage, from churches to choral music, is something for which we should have gratitude. It is because the suffering of global Anglicanism, and our own Church of England, comes from its inability to shut down or contain the same massive earthquakes of moral and theological divergence that, in the Catholic Church, are hidden, silenced, or otherwise papered over by the weight of authority.

This inability is grounded in an ecclesiology scorned by those secure in the papal arms which, in the Piazza San Pietro, enclose the world with such confidence: an ecclesiology which is compelled to admit that the Church cannot manufacture a cognitive unity of belief. Anglicanism is a constant, if reluctant, witness to institutional self-dispossession: it is always judged, always broken, and always waiting for the truth that comes from God's future.

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard Catholics laugh at the idea of a "Church" founded on a decadent king's sexual appetite. But they do not have eyes to see the spiritual genius with which some Anglicans have been able to receive as a blessing this seemingly unredeemable beginning.

All human institutions have murky origins. St Matthew tells us bluntly that God took flesh in this world through just such ancestries, and was not ashamed to call murderers and harlots his forebears. Anglicanism is unable to hide from the sins of religion. Its greatest theologians have seen this as grace, not curse.

I say this even as theological comebacks rise in my throat. Confusion is, after all, not a virtue. We confess a Church one, holy, catholic and apostolic, with a divinely instituted government; not a Church in constant disarray, no matter how much honesty there may be in such a state. But I refuse to suppress the strange tenderness, the admiration, that comes as I watch the anguished processes of dialogue and discernment that Rowan Williams and now Justin Welby have tried to nourish and enable.

Theirs is a Christian body that is unable to disguise its human frailty, its constant susceptibility to Pharisaism, or the impassable chasm that now divides it into global north and global south. It testifies to its own incompleteness.

And the Church of Rome seems more receptive to an ecclesiology of fragility than it used to be: coaxed and pushed by Francis, it looks less like an impregnable citadel, to the dismay of many, and more like a broken family that realises that the gift of unity comes from God's mercy and not from human power.

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