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The Formation of Clergy

Till recently, many would have denied there was a crisis in the Episcopal clergy. Freed from old and hidebound restrictions, the priesthood had been opened to women, to 'late vocations' (second-career candidates), and 'non-stipendiary' ministers (clergy with a full time job in secular fields). As with the "renewal" of the Church's liturgy and theology, creative sources of energy had been released which would revitalize the clergy and the church. Enthusiastic rhetoric along such lines became the staple diet of synods and conventions.

Reality, however, is now beginning to sink in. At the most superficial level, the crisis of the Episcopal clergy is apparent. They are aging rapidly; and they are not being replaced. I am told that priests under 40, like me, constitute something 2% of the Episcopal clergy. Clergy shortage may become as standard a story for mainline Protestant denominations as it has been for the Roman church.

Beyond the decline in numbers, the crisis has another deeper dimension as yet unacknowledged: the failure of the seminaries to impart a knowledge and love of classical Anglicanism in some recognizable form. To a greater or lesser extent, they have become places where the Anglican tradition of doctrine, of discipline, and of worship, has been deconstructed, dismissed and dismembered. In a way, one can hardly blame the clergy who come from these seminaries. They simply do not know the tradition. What they know of it, they know from the outside, as something profoundly alien. Contemporary education has effectively isolated them from their own tradition. In the "continuing" churches there seems to be a great love for the Prayer Book, but the theological education of its clergy is in many cases plainly inadequate. Enthusiasm is not enough; it must be built upon a foundation of knowledge and understanding, if it is to flourish in strength.

The failure of the seminaries is a great practical problem for the Church, and especially the faithful remnant, who seek to hand on unimpaired to posterity the tradition they have received. There is a great deal more to the Church than just the clergy, of course (thank goodness!); but without faithful clergy, and the doctrinal and liturgical foundation they are ordained to provide, the efforts of even the most faithful laity will be weakened and undermined.

How then can the clergy acquire a formation in the faith? The experience of Father Carreker and myself, as well as other younger

priests of like mind, suggests the answer. We both "did time" in seminaries--he at Sewanee, and I at Wycliff College, in Toronto-- but our formation in the tradition took place *outside* the seminaries.

In that formation, there were two key elements. First of all, our teachers guided us in the close reading of classical texts--books that formed the tradition of Western and Anglican Christianity--the poets, philosophers, and theologians of pagan and Christian antiquity, of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and even the Enlightenment. In the seminaries, when such books are read at all, they are usually interpreted through the distorting lens of contemporary ideology: which is to say, they are effectively silenced. What they have to say remains strange and alien to modern readers. However, when these authors are permitted to speak for themselves, *on their own terms*, they have the power to form (and transform!) the thinking of their readers, so that even late modern men like ourselves, estranged from the past, could begin to think and understand our tradition *from within*.

The counterpart to those studies was participation in the liturgical life of Prayer Book churches, above all in the daily office of Morning and Evening Prayer. On the one hand, only the great teachers of the tradition can help you truly understand the Church's Common Prayers. On the other, it is only in the Church's Common Prayers that you find the liturgical means to exercise the soul in accord with that understanding.

That sounds rather *theoretical*, I know--which is precisely its great strength. One feature of the contemporary seminary is a restless practicality, which has nothing to do with real practicality at all--an endless and futile busyness, that militates against clarity of thought. No doubt there are certain practical and personal skills necessary to the ministry; but such practical and personal skills are pointless if in fact we do not know what the point is. Pedagogic or pastoral technique is useless, if you have not acquired a thorough and subtle understanding of *what* it is you must teach. And what makes for the most compelling teachers? Not up-to-date technique, but a passionate knowledge and love of their subject, that spills over to their students even in ways that break every pedagogic rule. That is what we want from the clergy.

The enterprise this parish has therefore undertaken, as a mission and ministry to the wider church, is to provide such formation for clergy here at St John's. The project is called the Elliott House of Studies, after Bishop Stephen Elliott, first bishop of Georgia, first rector of this parish, and a great founder of schools and colleges, including the University of the South. Thanks to the generosity of donors, we have money to start up the project on a modest level - just two or three suitable students, whom we are currently seeking.

In accordance with the recommendations of the Long Range Planning Committee, the Vestry has unanimously agreed to authorize, as the third part of the Preservation Campaign, an appeal for \$300,000 to establish the Elliott House on a better footing. In the future, as the House becomes more established, we shall seek financial support outside the parish.

Fifty years ago, perhaps, there were many parishes like St. John's.

Now there are very few; and even among them St. John's is distinctive. In great part, that is what drew me here (no, it was not the climate): because I discerned in this parish a great and even unique witness to the Church. To establish Elliott House would diffuse the light of that witness more broadly and brightly than ever before. I regard it as the single most important practical measure we can take to ensure the handing on of our tradition unimpaired to our posterity.

This enterprise is new, untried, and in process of development We cannot know how, or even if, God will prosper it with His grace. But what it undertakes simply must be done; and no one else is doing it in the United States of America; and what parish is better suited for it than this one? I am constantly aware that the people of this parish want to make a difference. Through the Elliott House of Studies may God take that aspiration and intention into the working of His good and perfect will for our salvation.

The Rev. Gavin G. Dunbar

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