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Flighty Bishops

Two pieces of news crossed my desk this week, which, as providence would have it, were not unrelated.

The first was a report that officials at some level in the national Episcopal Church were seriously considering the prospect of "flying bishops". The second was an article in the journal First Things about a ruling of the Supreme Court of British Columbia on proposed homosexual marriage. These religious and secular issues stem, like a double headed hydra, from the same ominous source.

The proposal for "flying Bishops" is an attempt to placate conservative and embattled parishes in the Episcopal Church. Under this method of Episcopal oversight, a conservative Bishop would fly into a particular Diocese, with permission of the Bishop of the Diocese, and administer Confirmation and whatever Episcopal care the Parish needs. This arrangement would allow the particular parish to remain within the Episcopal Church, at least for the time being. This kind of role for "flying Bishops" has already been implemented in England with some amount of success. It may be the only choice for some parishes, and may be one day for us; I certainly hope not.

But what does the proposal really mean? On the part of the national church, it may reflect the pastoral concern of those who forgot how to be pastors long ago. More likely it would appear that the national church is nervous about what may happen if the extreme politicians in the church continue to have their way, and imagining this eventuality, they are planning desperately to forestall a mass exodus. Or the proposal for "flying Bishops" may be itself a shrewd political machination so as to seal the deal, and to remove conservatives from the scene completely, thus putting us all as it were in a special ward for the theologically orthodox, out of sight and out of mind.

On the part of the orthodox Bishops who take on this ministry to embattled parishes, this proposal offers a way for the minority who have been steadfast and long suffering to continue to do what God has intended.

Whatever it all means, the proposal for "flying Bishops" comes at the end of a long process of spiritual degeneration. It all began with the liberalization of the marriage canons some years ago. Next down the menacing chute came the trial liturgies and the eviction of the Prayer Book from parishes, university chapels, and entire dioceses. And then

devolved the illegal ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate. Now the downward spiral intensifies and we find ourselves in the dark swirling vortex of a collapsed institution.

Will it ever end? Not any time soon. Not until it can be truly healed. The proposal of "flying Bishops" is merely one more step in a rut of profound spiritual denial. It offers only a temporary and accidental solution to what is a problem of the very essence and being of the Church.

"Flying Bishops" will not stem the tide of ideology that now inundates our church, because what is at issue is a matter of Biblical authority and the theological mind. The church, as Christian church, cannot exist without the supremacy of Scripture and the wisdom and morality of tradition.

At best, the result the national church could achieve with this provision is a semblance of toleration. At worst, we shall awake and find ourselves groaning under the weight of an habitual compromise that has rendered our souls in-sensible to the truth of the Spirit.

Which brings us to the Supreme Court of British Columbia. Our good neighbors to the north (that would be true north!) conceived their own Constitution as a significant Christian idea, within a Christian state, whose Monarch still stands as the Defender of the Faith. Within that idea, written into the fabric of law, is the definition of marriage as a union of male and female.

Under the umbrella of their recently devised "Charter of Rights and Freedoms," some Canadians have sought to alter the law so as to include homosexual relationships under the legal identity of marriage. But the high court of British Columbia said this could not be done, because it violates the fundamental definition of marriage required by the Canadian Constitution:

What a breath of fresh air! There remains for rational and faithful men a relation to essential ideas that we have inherited through our institutions, which were themselves informed by the Christian Religion. For the Supreme Court of British Columbia, the essence of marriage is only possible in the precise sense in which our Lord Himself defined it. "Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to His wife, and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matthew 19).

While we may applaud the ruling of the Canadian Provincial Court, we may rest assured that those who advocate a new definition of marriage to include homosexual partnerships will not stop there. The same is true for our church.

The possible provision for "flying Bishops" will not dissuade the political interest groups who are doing everything they can to enact the latest ideology, (including the marriage of homosexuals and the ordination to the priesthood of practicing homosexuals), upon the very structures of our church, its orders, canons, liturgy, and sacraments. Only an understanding, a theological, spiritual, and ethical knowledge,

grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and articulated through the Church's wisdom, can definitively offer a resolution to vague and vain ideology. And then, with compassion and a resolute will, Bishops must do what they were consecrated to do, defend the faith once delivered to the saints. Such a true spiritual understanding and jurisdiction are the entire and only *raison d'être* for any and every Bishop. Anything else, even this proposal for "flying Bishops," is just flighty!

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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