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An Open Letter to the Bishop of Georgia (II)

Dear Bishop Louttit,

In keeping with your guiding principle, stated in your address to the 182nd Convention of the Diocese of Georgia, that out of the "struggle of opinions in the context of reading the Bible... the community will ultimately come to know the will of God," I continue to offer my own opinion.

To begin with, you made the excellent point that we were gathered together as a convention of the Church because God loves us even when we are unlovable. But then your talk took on a decidedly distrustful and accusatory tone, which I am not sure I fully understand.

You took the opportunity to remark on the growth of the membership of the Diocese, making a parenthetical comment about the fact that you do not trust the American Anglican Council, "a group on the conservative end of the Episcopal Church." You said this not a week after the clergy from four orthodox parishes met with you in your office in a meeting which ended in prayer and embraces. We requested that meeting in order to assure you of our loyalty to you, and continued fellowship with you in the Gospel. Our discussion was open and honest and heartfelt. You knew that we who were gathered there had associated ourselves with the American Anglican Council as an expression of united orthodoxy within the Episcopal Church and in Communion with the vast majority of national churches of the Anglican Communion that have declared themselves in impaired or broken communion with ECUSA. I suppose that upon reflection you determined that we are untrustworthy. I wish you had said this in our meeting, and not in a parenthetical comment.

And then you went on to make this astonishing remark, "But, brothers and sisters, even with our own growth Satan is very happy! He has a number of folks so angry with the Episcopal Church that they want to destroy it. Last year I proposed that to be ready to do the ministry God has given us to do we need to work together across congregational lines. Not God's dream, but Satan's anger, has had such inter-congregational conversations going on between those who want to form the 'true' Episcopal Church, which will have nothing to do with the ones of us on the other side of the issue of how we should treat our homosexual members. Love did not seem to be able to cause some congregations to work together for the growth of God's kingdom,

but anger has now caused these congregations to reach out to other people in other congregations.”

Bishop, are you sure you are not the one who is angry? It sure seems like it. On the other hand I think you have a point here, although not exactly as you perceive it.

The unity and resolve that you rightly perceive among the orthodox congregations is not based upon anger, nor is it satanic, nor is it exclusive. If this had been the case, the clergy who met with you, not a week before the convention, in honesty and good will, would not have done so.

No, our unity is something deeper. It consists in divine authority, in the authority of Scripture, in the faith once delivered to the saints, in moral truth which our tradition has always taught, and in the Communion that has been expressed and defended by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primates of the Anglican Communion. (You will note that this past week, in a statement to the General Synod of the Church of England, Archbishop Rowan Williams stated that he is “fully committed” to the Primates’ statement of October which called on the provinces to make adequate provision for episcopal oversight “for those in conscience unable to accept certain dispositions made by their provinces.” Such adequate episcopal oversight is to be executed in consultation with him as the Archbishop of Canterbury.)

It seems that what you are referring to when you speak of our being united, not by love, but by anger, is the fact that churchmen who differ on the issue of the Prayer Book, 1928 or 1979, and on the issue of the ordination of women, can be of one mind and heart in the orthodox faith. I am truly sorry that you feel this way, because I thought this kind of tolerance and mutual forbearance was exactly what you espoused. I wonder now if I have been mistaken all these years, and instead of truly honoring my (and our) position, even though you disagreed with it, you, in fact, did not honor it at all.

The truth about our unity as orthodox parishes is this. The issues of the Prayer Book and the ordination of women do not, in themselves, necessarily constitute an abandonment of the authority of Scripture, or a betrayal of the moral tradition of the Church Catholic, or the counsel of the wider Anglican Communion. The ordination of women is a grave matter, and the official position of the Anglican Communion is that we are in a period of discernment. The matter of the Prayer Book is in some respects more grave inasmuch as the new Prayer Book reflects such an impoverishment of the Church’s theological treasures. Again, to be on the side of the ordination of women, or the new Prayer Book, does not necessarily mean a repudiation of Scripture and a hallowing of sin; however, the acceptance of homosexual practice and the consecration of a man committed to that practice is indeed a repudiation of the moral teaching of the Scripture and the Catholic Church. Just ask the Russian and Greek and Oriental Orthodox churches who have cut off ecumenical relations with ECUSA as a result of what General Convention and New Hampshire did.

As for being angry? Have any of us ever been angry? Yes, as have you. But anger is not what unites us. Could the reason for your accusation be that you feel the hard line established in the Episcopal Church over the past twenty-five years, concerning the 1979 Prayer Book and the

ordination of women, is losing its ideological grip?

As for us, I would add that there is, in truth, some modicum of righteous indignation, when it comes to the arrogance and perfidy of ECUSA in relation to Holy Scripture and the rest of the Anglican Communion, not to mention the universal church. Righteous indignation, however, does not justify other expressions of anger, whether mine or yours. On this point we shall pray for each other.

But now this must be made abundantly clear. Orthodox Episcopalians may not have garnered the majority of votes at the General Convention, but that does not mean that we are out to "destroy the Episcopal Church." By doctrine, by intention, by inheritance, by loyalty to the Constitution of the Episcopal Church, it is we who continue as the Episcopal Church. Those who agree with the majority vote of the Convention and the pseudo-consecration of the Bishop of New Hampshire have themselves departed into a "purist" and "enlightened" sect. They declare that the Spirit is doing a new thing with them. We continue in what the Church Catholic has believed everywhere, always, and by all, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ whose mercies are new every day.

Finally, I want to end this part of my letter with a strong protest. I resent the implication in your address that we have mistreated the members of our parishes who are beset with the sin of homosexual practice. Indeed the opposite is true. We have called all sinners to repentance and to the power of the Gospel to change lives from misery into joy. I had hoped that you would share with the Diocese your statement at the Clergy Conference in which you said that the practice of homosexuality is "unhealthy." It seems to me the pastoral thing to do.

I agree with you that there are a number of sins more heinous than this particular one. And yet the words of St. Anselm ring in my ears, "We have not yet considered the gravity of sin." Or in the words of St. Paul, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). It is sin, small and great, that put the Lord of glory upon the cross. Even so, his grace, his forgiveness and the gift of repentance, is the wellspring of new life. Surely we must not deprive those who are beset with the practice of homosexuality from this grace and gift.

(to be continued)

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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