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The Second Sunday after Epiphany

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ELLIOTT HOUSE SEMINAR

What a joy it has been for us to hold our fourth annual seminar for clergy! This year the Rev'd Dr. Jeffrey Steenson, an old friend of our parish, led us through a series of lectures and discussions on the treatise of St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, On the Incarnation of the Word of God. It is one of the most important texts of the early church's developing theology, a pure pleasure for faithful clergy to consider.

Priests from all over the Southeast and Canada came together to hear these lectures and consider them. The seminar provides a way for the clergy to take a few days within the year and reflect again upon one of the formative writings of the Church. In the three previous years we have studied *The Republic of Plato*, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, and *The Journey of the Mind into God* by St. Bonaventure.

The idea of Elliott House grew naturally out of the life of our parish. It was William Ralston who set the course years ago, by reminding us over and over again, that it is our calling to love God with our mind as well as with our heart and soul. And it was he who conveyed to all of us the sheer delight that one can find in loving God in this way. Even though we miss his leadership, that delight carries on now in our parish, and extends to the Seminar each January when faithful Priests come together and share in their love of God through the theological history of his church.

The clergy leave the seminar, not only having enjoyed each other's fellowship, but stimulated in the discipline of Theology, which they pursue as they return to their various churches. And the parishioners of those churches benefit not only from refreshed clergy but from the improvement of their knowledge of the faith.

The reason for the Elliott House is first of all the love of God. But there is another attendant reason and that is the dearth of theological teaching in the seminaries. Most often the seminaries of our day and culture are crammed full of courses and concerns that have much to do with sociological and political trends and little to do with the theological roots of the church.

Even when a seminary sees clear to consider authentic Christian Theology, especially the formative periods of the church's life, there is little time spent in the texts that formed this history. And hence the need for the Elliott House seminar, a time to work through the

argument of a formative text.

When a clergyman is given the opportunity to do this, he makes the argument part of his own theological understanding and thereby enriches not only his own spiritual life, but those of his parishioners as well. While the emphasis of the work of the seminar is on the love of God with the mind, there is nothing more practical to the ministry of the Gospel than this kind of intellectual work.

In addition to the seminar itself, a lot of work goes on in the background to make our visitors feel welcome. Patti Victor, who is the administrator for the House, arranges the registration and information on lodging and anything else that may be needed. And each year now it has been the joy to have Patti, and her husband, Neil, provide an elegant dinner for the clergy in the Green Meldrim House the night before the seminar begins. Each of the three days of the seminar, breakfast is provided before the seminar begins as well as lovely things to snack on during the break in the morning and then again in the afternoon session. The day begins in the church with Morning Prayer, and ends with Evening Prayer. For lunch and dinner the clergy are free to enjoy our lovely city.

This year we have had the added pleasure of anticipating an upcoming event in the life of our lecturer Dr. Steenson. Jeffrey will be consecrated this Saturday as the Bishop coadjutor of the Diocese of the Rio Grande. It is a coincidence of providence, I think, that Jeffrey scheduled his lectures on St. Athanasius for Elliott House sometime before the Episcopal election in his diocese. Fr. Steenson has been a defender of the faith and of the catholic tradition, of which St. Athanasius was one of the principal architects, for many years. It has been said that Athanasius stood for the orthodox faith, at times, *contra mundum*, against the world. And it just so happened that by scheduling our seminar Jeffrey had to miss the meeting of the House of Bishops this week in Salt Lake City. One hopes for him that such providential scheduling will be the happy circumstance of his entire episcopacy.

It is no doubt a daunting prospect to become a bishop in the current state of the Episcopal Church. And there will be times when our friend will be confronted with very hard choices to make. We will keep him in our prayers. And we assure him of our support and love in the difficult days ahead. Most of all, we must often step back, every little while, and rejoice together in the communion that we share in Christ Jesus.

I suppose that in the final analysis what Elliott House is in its essence, what our seminars, our tutorials for those who come to study with us, and our actual study of ancient texts really involves, is our part in the Communion of Saints. The real joy of loving God with the mind is that we can share this one with another. We are indeed needful of the minds of others. When the love of knowing the wisdom of God, made know through the writing of the saints, becomes the joy we hold in common, then, we are at our happiest, and the Church, the Body of Christ, grows ever more perfectly in love. And we are joined even now with those who delight in God, on that other shore, and in that greater Light.

The Rev'd Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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