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THAT THEY MAY BE ONE

Our good friend Jeffrey Steenson, now the Bishop of Rio Grande, recently made a most significant speech to the house of Bishops. He told them how he had entered the Episcopal Church as a hopeful evangelical, only to discover the church overwhelmed with theological liberalism. And such has been the case his entire ministry. Now as the crisis of the Anglican Communion intensifies, Bishop Steenson has called on both theological liberals and conservatives to exercise what is the mark of the Christian, namely love.

Jeffrey is right on the mark. This is precisely the point that many churches of the Anglican Communion have brought against the Episcopal Church. As the Windsor Report stated so profoundly, by breaking with the moral tradition of the Church, unilaterally, and with disregard for the rest of the Communion, the Episcopal Church broke the bonds of affection. They sinned against charity. I say they although I am aware that as long as we are in the Episcopal Church the they is in some sense we, at least institutionally speaking.

And there can be no doubt that in return, many who claim to be orthodox, evangelical, and reformers for the truth have committed the same grievous error. As much as I admire the churches of Africa and the Southern Cone and Indonesia for their courageous stand against the wealthy and powerful American church, they themselves are not perfect, and sometimes their zeal outruns their patience. And no doubt there are also a number of arrogant self-styled prophets in the Episcopal Church, who think that the fact that they wear mitres gives them the right of indifference to the worldwide communion and to many of their own flock. Indeed some have persecuted their own.

There are sins against charity on both sides. So the question becomes what shall we do? And the answer is to remember our catholic roots. The Anglican Church will not survive unless she remembers who she is.

It is of the utmost importance that both the leaders of the Anglican Communion Network and the opposing side of revisionist bishops look backward to the saints and martyrs and theologians of the Church, and review where we have come from. It cannot be denied, and I know that many will dismiss this as the same old position of St. John's - although it is now as true as ever - that the fundamental and comprehensive change in the Prayer Book was at the center of the dissolution of the catholicity of Anglicanism. The so-called Anglo-

Catholics, liberal and orthodox, that advanced and still advance the 1979 Book, have endorsed not a pristine Catholicism but an ideology that is even now being overturned by contemporary liturgical scholarship.

What then do we do? In looking back surely we must consider some of the crucial lessons our forefathers learned. These were lessons that took on historical significance and that it seems now we must relearn. I have one in mind in particular. And it is the Donatist controversy of the fourth century. Please permit me this brief and inadequate historical digression. It is to the point.

The Donatist controversy stemmed from the persecution of the church by the Roman emperor Diocletian. Diocletian demanded that Christians cease the practice of their religion, hand over their Scriptures, and take part in the cult of the Roman Emperor. Some in fact did so, and later regretted it, and repented. Those catholic Christians who did this were called traditores, "handers-over," and thus traitors.

The controversy arose when the Donatists, followers of Bishop Donatus and others, refused to recognize Caecilian, Bishop of Carthage, on the grounds that he was consecrated by a Bishop who had been a traditor. Because he was consecrated by a morally flawed bishop, the Donatists believed that Caecilian was unfit to administer the sacraments of the Church. And so the Donatists formed what they considered a church that was sacramentally pure.

St. Augustine and others argued against the Donatists, saying that moral flaws of a Bishop or a Priest did not invalidate the sacraments. The sacraments are Christ's own and the ministers of those sacraments are imperfect servants of his perfect grace. No moral flaw of a minister could undo what Christ was in fact doing. The consequence of all of this was that the Donatists did just the opposite of what they intended. Instead of preserving catholicity and the integrity of the sacraments they themselves became schismatic, which means that by separating themselves from the Catholic Church, they sinned against charity - which is the unitive power of the Church - the very bond of the Body of Christ.

It was charity, love, that was lacking in the official action of the Donatist church. And thus St. Augustine argued that the sacraments of the Donatists, while valid, were incomplete. They lacked the completion of charity which is the gift of God to man, joining man to man and man to God, and which derives from the being of God himself whose own unity is Love. The Church Catholic, the universal Christian Church, was one because of this love. Hence, if a Donatist were to return into the Catholic fold he would not have to be rebaptized. By the joining of himself in love to the Catholic Church, his sacraments, already administered in schism, were actually and effectually completed.

It was a difficult and subtle argument of Augustine, but one which must be true and which we must relearn today. "Without charity all our doings are nothing worth." Love is the activity that binds the Christian Church together. Bishop Steenson was right and good to claim that he would always endeavor to keep the bond of affection with those Christians with whom he disagreed. And so he spoke of mere institutional and doctrinal separation, and not of a separation in the

love of Christ. In our day and age when ideologies and private interests run rampant, this perspective is altogether wise and prudent and necessary.

What lesson should we learn from the Donatist controversy and apply to the current crisis of the Church?

It is this. Those who support the revisionism of the Church's moral theology have separated themselves from the Church Catholic by this aberration, but more deeply they have sinned against the bonds of affection – charity. And those who would now so quickly dispense with their ties to the Episcopal Church, both within the Episcopal Church and without in the larger communion may be themselves sinning against charity. Certainly the kind of patience that charity demands has been short-lived in some cases. On the other hand, those who have been persecuted so severely by arrogant and tyrannical bishops must do all they can to have the intention of charity while they make their way in another institution.

Which brings me to my final point. If the mark of the Christian is charity, which it most certainly is, then charity must guide the resolution of our crisis. We may in fact differ on the theological and moral issues at hand. And our disagreement may lead to separation. But it must be done charitably. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). It may be the charitable thing for some congregations to join themselves to other institutions, and in so doing some may deem it best to walk away from their property and leave it to the Episcopal Church. For others it may be the charitable thing for the bishop and his diocese to allow parishes who are the rightful owners of their property to leave with it. One hopes that charity in both these cases will be real. If not, the law suits and internecine squabbling will be hideous and scandalous. The question is whether charity, or property, is more important.

And finally, one must remember that the Lord prayed for his disciples that they might be one even as he and the Father are one (John 17: 20-23). We know that the unity of the Father and the Son is a unity of perfect love in the Spirit. It remains the great scandal of Christianity that we live separated from each other, with seemingly more churches scattered over the earth than there are stars in heaven. Such a state of affairs is grievous indeed, more grievous than we realize. Only by returning to true catholicity shall we live as Christ intended and prayed for us to live. God help us. Lord, have mercy upon us.

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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