

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.37 No.36

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

07/30/06

"THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH" (II)

In last week's Parish Paper, I assayed what we mean by "the Holy Catholic Church". In its primary sense, "catholic" means "according to the whole", and so this article of the Creed refers to that wholeness of the divine revelation which is found in Christ, "the Word of God...full of grace and truth" (John 1.14), and conferred by him on the church: the whole truth of God entrusted to the whole body of the faithful for the sake of the whole world. It is this wholeness of the revelation of the Word of God which makes the church catholic: conversely, only in and through the communion of the Catholic church, in and through fellowship with other faithful Christians, can we approach the wholeness and fullness of the grace and truth of Christ. As the church's liturgy teaches us, when we approach the Lord with our prayers and thanksgivings, to hear his holy Word and set forth his most worthy praise, we do not normally say "I" but "we": it is as "very members incorporate of his mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people", represented in the assembly of the faithful in this particular place and time, that individual Christians enter into the fullness of the grace and truth revealed in Christ. And therefore catholic Christians have no right to "pick and choose" (the root meaning of the word "heresy") what they believe, or to make unilateral alterations to the common faith of the Catholic church.

These other Christians comprise, first, the saints who have gone before us, from whom we received the faith; second, those who are yet come, to whom we shall in turn hand on this same faith unimpaired; and third, not least of all, those whom God puts in the pew next to us – those people with whom (it may be) we have very little in common, except Christ. This week I would like to speak about catholic fellowship with this third class of Christians.

Just as the church's common prayer teaches us the Christian faith by expressing the whole of catholic truth in a condensed form, so also, by the discipline it imposes upon worshippers, common prayer teaches us what it means to live with the Christian in the next pew in the common life of the Catholic church. Common prayer, by its very nature, exacts certain attitudes from its participants; and thereby it trains us in the virtues requisite for the Christian life in general, not just in the acts of worship.

First, the church's common prayer requires we put aside our own ideas and actions for the sake of those set forth in the liturgy. What goes on in the liturgy is not an expression of any individual's tastes and ideas;

it is the expression of the Church's common faith. In common prayer we leave behind our own little world, defined merely by our own tastes, desires, and understanding, and we step into a larger world defined by the faith of the Catholic church. We must hear about and pray for things which perhaps do not concern us personally, because they are the concerns of the church as whole; and at times we must take part in proceedings whose significance is obscure to us. There is a sacrifice required in this, a sacrifice of the pride that insists upon independence, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. And so, simply by participating in the church's common prayer, we are trained in the virtue of humility.

Second, and closely related to this, the church's common prayer requires that we give up spiritual isolation for the sake of sharing the common life of the church. We renounce the right to choose our own company; and accept the duty of sharing in the life of others and making it our own. The needs and desires of the church as a whole become ours. We accept the good of our neighbour as something we must actively and steadfastly will as though it were our own. By this requirement, the liturgy trains us in the virtue of charity.

In current liturgical thought and practice, this sharing of the common life is often expressed through the "passing of the peace", conceived of as a "community-building" exercise. It is doubtful, however, whether the common life of the church is properly understood in these terms, as a network of interpersonal relationships to be enhanced through exercises in group dynamics. This matter was addressed by the late Romano Guardini (1885-1968), in his influential little book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, first published in 1918, long before the fashion for passing the peace had appeared. He made a point of saying that "the union of the members [in charity] is not directly accomplished from man to man. It is accomplished by and in their joint aim, goal, and spiritual resting place – God – by their identical creed, sacrifice and sacraments." Within the charity of catholic fellowship there is a proper degree of external reserve and restraint among individual Christians. "Their fellowship notwithstanding, the one individual can never force his way into the intimacy of the other...never force upon the latter his own characteristics, feelings and perceptions. Their fellowship consists in community of intention, thought, and language, in the direction of eyes and heart to the one aim..." One further quotation: "On the person of individualistic temper, therefore, a sacrifice for the good of the community is required; from the man of social disposition, submission to the austere restraint which characterizes liturgical fellowship". Both temperaments are modified by the discipline imposed on us by the act of common prayer.

What the church's common prayer requires of us for the act of worship is also what catholic truth requires of us for the entirety of our lives as Christians. It is no accident that the virtues of humility and charity instilled in us by the church's common prayer are the very ones to which the New Testament epistles constantly exhort us. Their practice is indispensable to the common life of Christians, to the unity in the truth of the catholic church. To live in catholic grace and truth (that is, in Christ) requires that we must live in humility and charity; and, conversely, as we live in humility and charity, catholic grace and truth (that is, Christ) lives in us. No one, regardless of circumstances, is exempted from this discipline – though, to our shame, we often claim the right to do so.

For those who claim that right (which is no right), St. Paul has these words of warning: "if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Galatians 5.15). Humility and charity perhaps may sound like pious clichés, but their presence or absence have very real, practical consequences for the Catholic church. To speak only the obvious, no one wants to belong to a church rife with "biting and devouring". To "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4.30) in this way is no abstraction: it does harm in very tangible and painful ways to the church we love, and it hardens our hearts against the grace and mercy of God we so greatly need. "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4.31-32). I know of no congregation in the Holy Catholic Church where these words do not need to be heard again, and promptly acted upon.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar



[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.