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The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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HONESTY

Late last summer I vexed a few people in the diocese with an essay in the Parish Paper on what we should be looking for in the next Bishop of Georgia. (A reaction I probably compounded by criticizing the lamentably sub-credal tendencies in the Presiding Bishop's teaching.) As usual, very little of this response reached me directly. (Clergy often find it hard to speak about their disagreements. With one exception, the amicable discussions I had with critics were all at my initiative.)

In the essay I laid out four parameters I thought necessary to the unity of the Diocese: (1) adherence to the historic Faith; (2) compliance with the Windsor Report's recommendations; (3) respect for conscientious dissent in the ordination of women; and (4) respect for conscience in the use of historic Anglican liturgy. To give the Diocese credit, there seems to be little controversy about the fourth parameter. That is a very positive change from the hostility that used to be directed against the old Prayer Book, and I look forward to helping the Diocese in the rediscovery of its liturgical heritage. About the first two items, I have heard little, though I do not assume that silence necessarily means assent. It was the third parameter – the question of a Bishop whose orders would be acknowledged by the whole of the Diocese and Communion – that seems to have made people bristle.

The chief complaint was that I was picking a fight with the diocese. Yet my original essay was explicit that there already exists a basis upon which St. John's has been able to remain within the diocese despite our disagreements, and I expressed the hope that we could continue on what I called this "proven basis for unity in mission". That's not picking a fight; it is appealing to the diocese not to cause needless division.

Far from picking a fight, I have tried to forestall one. I suggested that the Diocese might request Dr Jefferts Schori to delegate the consecration to undisputed Bishops, as she has done in other cases. I also acknowledged the possibility that the diocese might accept as Bishop someone whose liturgical ministrations St. John's could not in conscience welcome, and I offered a solution – some form of Alternative Episcopal Oversight (AEO), whereby liturgical duties could be delegated by the new Diocesan to some other Bishop. This would maintain the Diocesan's jurisdiction and respect St. John's conscience. To my mind this solution has obvious merit, but to others it appears to threaten the integrity of the Diocese.

I think fear for Diocesan integrity goes together with the other complaint about my essay – that I was imposing St. John’s theological agenda upon the rest of the Diocese. I would argue that the situation is precisely the reverse. By electing and consecrating a person whose episcopal orders are in doubt, the Diocese would be imposing its theological agenda on St. John’s – the agenda that says that General Convention is free to ignore its own constitution and remake the historic Faith and Order of the church as it suits itself, thus violating its implicit covenant with its own members, with the wider Church, and – let’s not forget – its Lord. It is a little late to worry about the jurisdictional integrity of the Diocese when its theological integrity has already been compromised. You cannot expect to make unilateral changes in matters of essential common concern and expect unity to continue as before.

This leads me to the solution proposed by some persons, to whom I make this belated reply (with apologies for tardiness). It is not unlikely, they point out, that the person elected will be a man; at his consecration by Dr Jefferts Schori a number of male Bishops will probably lay on hands as well; if he does not receive his orders from Dr. Jefferts Schori then he will surely do so from someone else.

Problem solved? Not quite. I understand why many Episcopalians might find this an attractive solution. But consider what it really means: that the conscientious appeal for theological clarity in a matter essential to the church’s unity is met by... fudge! “Embrace the ambiguity.” What more could we ask for? Except, perhaps, honesty.

Let me be clear: I do not question the sincerity of my critics, for whose courteous responses I am grateful. But honesty requires of us much more than this solution: the honesty to acknowledge that – as a result of the unilateralism of the General Convention - we do not have a commonly accepted ordained ministry; the honesty to grapple seriously with the consequences of that division, instead of looking for a quick, cheap fix; the honesty to admit that this solution papers over the cracks and cannot possibly provide long-term security for conscience (For given that the number of Bishops whose orders are questionable is steadily rising, the assurance that at least one Bishop of unquestioned orders has participated in a consecration of another Bishop must steadily erode); the honesty to admit that this solution has played a long-standing part in the process of making theological conservatives into second-class citizens. Honesty is hard work, and painful: I do not like doing it any more than the next man. But it does not get easier by being put off. And it might just lead us all into a Diocesan fellowship happier and healthier for us all. GGD

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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