

Doing our Work: Formative Anglicans and the Catholic Church

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At the beginning of Lent this year, I had the privilege of spending several weeks in Rome for research related to my dissertation at the Vatican Secret Archives. On one particular morning while preparing for my day, I was struck by a story from England which was being broadcast on the BBC's International programming. The reporters displayed several quaint stone Anglican churches in the English countryside, and they were explaining that on that particular day, seventy churches across Great Britain would be simultaneously ringing their bells at 2 P.M. on Saturday, Feb 21 to mark the 40th birthday of England's Churches Conservation Trust. The reporters explained that this particular trust is a national charity which cares for several hundred of the country's finest historic Anglican churches, which are no longer used as regular places of worship. Thus, the National Conservation Trust has taken over, and has organized various civic celebrations, which will offer to members of the public the chance to explore the heritage of these vacant and dormant centuries-old church buildings.

As we are here today to consider the patrimony of the Anglican heritage, it might be helpful to consider the very poignant words of a recent source which speaks from the world at large, and in as much as our society gathered here might be described as its own kind of Conservation Trust in England, I would like to refer again to the words of one regional manager for The Churches Conservation Trust, who explained the situation of abandoned and decaying ecclesial edifices in England to the BBC as follows:

Our churches are centuries old, each is unique and each has its own significance both historically and architecturally. (But) Many historic churches are in desperate need of repair and cannot take part in (any) celebrations because their (structures) are broken or missing or the very fabric is degraded. This means that the churches cannot be fully enjoyed by the local community and their historical importance is at risk of being lost. *However*, if cared for correctly, they can also provide contemporary spaces for everyone to enjoy while also preserving and celebrating these great buildings for future generations. The cause needs your support and I hope as many people as possible (will) come.

It strikes me that there may be no better mandate to describe our reason for meeting here today; the Pastoral Provision of John Paul II exists to care for the Anglican heritage properly. But Cardinal John Henry Newman put it another way, when he spoke in an age

prior to the rampages of secularity which have taken their toll on Christian communities today. Speaking of formative Anglicanism in relationship to the Catholic Church in his *Apologia*, Newman could say that in as much as the Catholic Church's presence had been so weakened in England, it could be described as a good thing that Anglicanism persisted there to carry on the work of the Catholic Church, though at a distance. In Newman's words, "(Anglicans are) doing our work; and, though it does us harm in a measure, at present the balance is in our favor... (for) Anglicans assist and sustain the Catholic Church... (by maintaining) those great Catholic principles and doctrines which it has, up to this time, successfully preached."¹ As we all know, *this* sort of description has become a commonplace in the Catholic Church's reflection on her relationship with Anglicanism, as we find in the classic statement of *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 8, in which we find this relevant refrain as we consider the role of formative Anglicans. You all may know it well:

There is one Church of Christ... this Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, although *many* elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the (one) Church of Christ, are forces impelling towards Catholic unity.² Etc.

These words have been viewed as being especially apropos to the Anglican situation, since, in the words of the ecclesialogist Fr. Yves Congar, Anglicanism occupies "a (unique) place apart" among those Christian groups which owe their separation and origin to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.³ Such magisterial descriptions were anticipated in Cardinal Newman's sense of gratitude for Anglicanism's performance of the work which properly belongs to the Catholic Church; and thus the same idea is quoted by another ecumenical luminary of Vatican II. In his work entitled *The Church of the Word Incarnate*, Cardinal Charles Journet clarifies for us that while the particular work of the Catholic Church is the *sacramental* work which saves the world, the work of the separated Christian communities must be understood as the work of those who are *being* saved by the work of another. Journet puts it this way:

¹ John Henry Newman, "Note E" of *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London, 1920) p. 379-383. Qtd. Charles Cardinal Journet, *Theology of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1958) 310.

² *Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium*. Solemnly promulgated by Pope Paul VI, November 21, 1964.

³ Yves Congar, "The Anglican Conception of Unity: Via Media- "High Church" and Non-Roman Catholicism" in *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion* (London: The Centenary Press, 1939), 145.

We have to recognize two categories of those who are saved by incorporation into Christ. In the first way, those invested with the sacramental characters, are able to participate in the very exercise of redemptive worship; the others, lacking the sacramental characters, can participate only in the satisfactory *effects* of Christian worship, and that in a measure (which is) inevitably incomplete. The first are saved inasmuch as, united to Christ, they continue to offer His redemptive sacrifice for all men of their generation; (but) the second are saved inasmuch as the redemptive sacrifice continues to be offered *for them* by Christ and by the Christians of their generation. The first are born up by Christ in order that they may bear others up; ...they, with Him, and as incorporated with Him as priests, are His members who redeem and save. The second are born up by Christ and by the first sort of members together; they are the members of Christ (who are) redeemed and saved...And yet how much they enjoy and use His grace! – and *in this way* the universality of the Church is maintained even in the division of Christian communities from the Catholic Church!... but what Christ wants, as always, is for His glory and grace to be fully known, (by being) fully visible.⁴

Journet concludes by giving thanks for the fact that on account of God's manifold graces such as those which have formed the Anglican patrimony, the most basic tenet of the Christian faith is vividly displayed and even flourishes in the sad state of divided Christendom, because it is in this sort of relationship between the sacramental communities on the one hand, and the separated brethren who carry out the work of the Catholic Church on the other, that we see the fundamental Christian intuition that one gives himself over to God for the sake of another; and in this way, even in their divisions, Christians in our time remain graced with a witness to Christ our Lord for the benefit of the world.

Yet despite this common reference to the most basic structure of the Christian faith by which we can construe the present division between the Catholic Church and Anglicanism, we also see that attitudes towards the Anglican patrimony, given the fact of persistent Anglican dissidence, have been varied. Near the eve of the Oxford Movement, priestly converts such as Fr. Robert Hugh Benson recorded the memoirs of their conversions from Anglican orders to the Catholic Church in the language of one who looks back on the fond familiarity enjoyed with a favorite, dilapidated prostitute. In recent days, Catholic ecumenists have of course taken up the mandates of Vatican II which authorizes dialogue with Christian communities as communities which are invested with their own kind of legitimacy, and they have thus spoken with more sympathy to Anglicans about their tradition. In between these positions we find such statements as that of Dom Lambert

⁴ Journet, *Church of the Word Incarnate Vol I.* (Sheed and Ward, 1955), 60.

Beaduin, who famously explained to his fellow theologians that Anglicanism would best be served by a model of reunion, not absorption, as its particular formula of reconciliation with Rome;⁵ and this on account of Anglicanism's institutions, laws and liturgy, internal organization, historical traditions, continuous Catholic tradition and adherence to the authority of Scripture and the guidance of the early Church, and so on.

And while such recent Catholic commendations of the Anglican tradition and patrimony have been right and good, these perspectives are always qualified by the theologians, such as Newman, who have taught that such assets must indeed be understood only and always in the sense of a patrimony merely, because on their own, as we have heard, they cannot yet be considered to be the proper endowments of the one true maternal church who alone is the Bride of the Lamb. In Anglicanism as in other separated traditions, we rightly admire a kindly patrimony which is graciously given as an inheritance to nurture natural children; but in persistent separation from the Church which Christ established by for Himself, these gifts cannot yet reflect the intimacy of a dowry, which is given to honor the total surrender of one self to another. As Newman put it, even Anglicanism's "monument of ancient wisdom, momentous arm of political strength, source of popular advantage, and to a certain point, witness to religious truth... still cannot call itself the Bride of the Lamb."⁶ In other words, while Newman gave ample thanks for the Anglicans who carried out Catholic work, he rightly recalled that it is one thing to be an efficient and capable executive assistant; it is another thing entirely to be a bride. And thus John Paul II's encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, which particularly stresses the nuptial nature of the Catholic Church in relationship to Christ the Bridegroom, notes the relevant distinction in highlighting the presence of "the architectural and mosaic splendors of the Christian East and West (which are) a patrimony belonging to all believers;" but these gifts point beyond themselves to a kind of consummation, since they "contain a hope, and even a pledge, of (our) desired fullness of communion in faith and in celebration." As pledge of communion, the Anglican patrimony is something given for the anticipation of what yet may come to be.

⁵ "Practical Conclusions" in *The Church of England United Not Absorbed* [*L'Eglise Anglicane Unie non Absorbée*]. First published in *Irenikon*, Sept.1926. Qtd. Yves Congar, "Corporate Reunion and an English Uniate Church," in *Divided Christendom* 287.

⁶ Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, qtd. Cardinal Charles Journet, *Theology of the Church* (New York: Ignatius Press, 2004), 309.

Since John Paul II of all people taught us that in fact the most splendid mosaic of the patrimony of western Christianity lies not in its architecture and mosaics, but rather in its persons, let me pause here to consider a brief list of those Anglicans who, as Anglicans, definitively carried out the Church's work and offered the Church's grace to a needy world. The list of such Anglicans who have extended what Yves Congar refers to as "the peculiar genius of Anglicanism" can go on and on; there are, at first glance, the Anglican Divines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men like Jeremy Taylor, Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrews, and the Oxford Movement theologians who upheld in England the firmest sense of the Catholic doctrine of Christ's Incarnation and the attendant practices - monasticism, the sacramental life, and the hierarchical functions of the male episcopate - which protected and proclaimed that precious truth in the face of 16th century suggestions that Christ had not really come in the flesh. Their fellows included -(bishop) Gore, F.D. Maurice, J.N. Figgis, T.A. Lacey, C.H. Turner, H.D. Sweete, (bishops) Lightfoot and Westcott. Their scholarly and spiritual tradition was crowned in the twentieth century by scholars such as the great Eric Maskall, the Anglican Thomist of King's College London. And in the trenches of the theological life, we recall many humbler heroes of the same cause, such as Fr. Paul of Graymoor, who devoted his humble life in the practice of Franciscan spirituality to reversing, in his own person, the effects of a king's error and schism.

In contemporary times, Anglicanism has given us the popular apologetic of C. S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers, whose thought continues to form young Protestants and evangelicals with the Church's universal truth. Anglicans such as Evelyn Underhill gave to the modern era a conceptual framework and vocabulary for the mystical experience, which the greatest spiritual thinkers of the Christian tradition have struggled over. And Anglican scholars such as J. N. D. Kelly revived a reverence for the church fathers among a generation of young patristics scholars, which has no doubt included many a young Catholic priest poring over his books in seminary. And, you all will be interested to note that among young theologians today, a recent poll showed that we Catholics would be very glad, at any point, to receive the excellent theological work of N.T. Wright, Oliver O'Donovan, John Webster, and James Dunn. (however, the poll indicated that we are slightly less certain as to what to do with the like of John Millbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, and so on.) In the secular arena, formative Anglicans and Episcopalians have also contributed greatly to

the restoration and re-vivification of culture and the common good; for my part in the current generation, I think easily of T.S. Eliot's poetry, the relatively edifying messages of the U2 band, and a host of statesmen, scientists, and artists.

And I have something personally to add to this list- a brief litany of thanks for the Anglicans who formed me for my conversion to the Catholic Church. First, as a graduate student busy with summertime social work in Africa, I was struck by the sainted nineteenth century martyrs of Uganda who joined St. Charles Lwanga and his companions in a common martyrdom while as yet unbaptized catechumens. The Anglican martyrs of Uganda did their part to show me what it really looks like to offer simple, poignant witness to the one Gospel; and they remind us that what is required of each of us is to celebrate and enact that Gospel in the real and total solidarity of those whom Christ has called to be one with Him, and with one another. The eleven young Protestant Anglicans who joined their Catholic friends died calling on the name of Jesus and proclaiming the old refrain, "you can burn our bodies, but you cannot harm our souls." When the Catholic missionary order of the White Fathers was expelled from Uganda following these martyrdoms, the friends of the martyrs carried on their work, translating and printing the Catholic catechism into the native languages, and giving secret instruction in the faith. When the White Fathers returned decades later, they found five hundred Christians and one thousand catechumens waiting for them, thanks in part to the witness of martyred Anglican catechumens. In the particularly vivid warmth and clarity which one finds on the African continent, we see today not only the tragedy of separated Christians which heightens the problem of violent tribalism throughout eastern Africa, but more importantly, we recall in the Ugandan martyrs the simplicity of total response to the Gospel. And in light of their history of assent to Christ, in common with their Catholic brothers and teachers, the current religious divide between Catholic and Protestant Anglican Christians in Eastern Africa seemed all the more troubling to me, and provoked my resolve to do my part to make Christendom one person less divided by my confirmation in the Catholic Church.

Secondly, I was also formed by the example of a certain debutante who lived in Manhattan, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who was prepared by the grace at work in her Episcopalian parish and by the sacrament of her marriage for the courageous decision to receive Christ in the Catholic Church and to transform her culture by the inculcation of virtue and understanding. Her formation as an Anglican prepared her to be one of the

keystones of the Catholic Church in America; perhaps from the ardent love for catholicity which was nurtured in her early years, she learned to love the particular work of the Catholic Church, which she would later carry out so well. As she explained to the religious community which she founded: "The first end I propose in our daily work is to do the will of God; secondly, to do it in the manner he wills it; and thirdly, to do it because it is his will."

Thirdly, I give thanks for G.K. Chesterton, that contemporary teacher of the faith who needs no introduction. As is the case with many young former evangelicals, I have always thought that the need to explain the Gospel adequately in the modern culture tends to require a thorough acquaintance with his work, which displays so beautifully the elegance and erudition which one immediately associates with an Anglican style.

And finally, I must give thanks for Oscar Wilde, whose wit, honesty, and (dare I say-his longing for holiness) was expressed in his writings under the watchful gaze of the photos of Cardinal Manning and Pope Pius IX, which he had hung in his rooms in Oxford. This particular Anglican successfully confronted me again and again in my own weakness and forms of decadence; and I have to note that his summary of the Incarnation in a letter to his friend W.W. Ward neatly concludes the "beauty and necessity" of the complex Athanasian doctrine of the Incarnation for an age which was increasingly denying our Lord's personhood; in the way that only an artist like Wilde could say, "That central belief of Christianity helped humanity grasp at the skirts of the Infinite. Since [the birth of] Christ the dead world has woke up from sleep. Since him we have lived." And finally, Oscar Wilde's deathbed conversion to the Catholic Church surely reminds us that mercy is always waiting for us even when we, in our feebleness, cannot quite yet renounce the things that hold us for that which we know to be true.

I am sure that each of us could quickly compose our own litany of thanks for the formative Anglicans who have shaped and taught us. You will notice that my personal list of formative Anglicans is composed of those who eventually left Anglicanism and converted to the Catholic Church. And this is deliberate. As the language of *Lumen Gentium* makes clear, the grace that is given to form the children of the Father throughout the world has as its proper end the edification of the one Catholic Church, which was founded on Peter and is still recognizable in her temporal society and structure. And while many may carry out the Catholic Church's work in anonymity and even ignorance, according to the state of divided Christendom which is the wound of our time, a work which is truly good is a work which is

brought to completion. And in this regard, we recall that a “patrimony” has always to do with the property of the fatherland; and an expatriated patrimony in exile, for all its beauty and nostalgia, will always be a fragile and waiting thing for those expatriots who must always and inevitably hearken back in their identity to the place from which they have come. However romantic this scenario may seem, it remains the case that the Father has in fact prepared a present *home* for His children, so that the whole world may also be welcomed to His table, and indeed, to His wedding feast. And for those of us who have known that feast, perhaps we can best pray for Anglican brothers and sisters in the words of the administrator of a certain British national trust:

Many historic churches are in desperate need of repair and cannot take part in (any) celebrations because their (structures) are broken or missing or the building's fabric is degraded. This means that the churches cannot be fully enjoyed by the local community and their historical importance is at risk of being lost. However, if cared for correctly they can also provide contemporary spaces for everyone to enjoy while also preserving and celebrating these great buildings for future generations.

On its own, the grace of Anglicanism is a grace which can only hearken back, wait and anticipate something more. Reunited with the Catholic Church, those graces can flourish in their proper context and for their proper end. Meanwhile, if Anglicanism’s patrimony is identified by the modern culture in abandoned little buildings and antiquated bells, such that we find a precious legacy scattered, let it be gathered; where it has become fragile, let it be made whole; let its living saints give more than mental assent to the content of their great patrimony, and let them also offer their bodies as living sacrifices, and march into their proper place in the Canons of the Catholic Church, and let its greatest servants venture even beyond the demanding tasks of maintaining that patrimony, and into something more; into what St. Bernard describes as that prerogative of the one Church, not a mere task, nor an inheritance, but “an embrace which is eternal.”

There is always more to be said; and here I think not only of the haunting words of the Apocalypse, where the Spirit and the Bride say no longer “wait,” but “come,” but I also think of the beautiful conclusion of *Apostolicae Curae*, in which Pope Leo XIII proposes the specific means by which Anglicans can become truly formative agents of the Catholic Church’s grace, which is dispersed in every place, and which is always given for the conversion of every person, whether they are presently within or without the Church’s fold. And here I quote the Pope’s words, which were directed in a special way to those who work:

“ministers of religion in their respective communities,” and all who have at heart the glory of God and the salvation of souls. The pope’s mandate to all Anglicans who would carry out the work of the Catholic Church goes like this:

Let them be the first in joyfully submitting to the divine call and (let them) obey it, and (thereby) furnish a glorious example to others. Assuredly, with an exceeding great joy, their Mother, the Church, will welcome them, and will cherish with all her love and care those whom the strength of their generous souls has led back to her bosom amidst many trials and difficulties. Nor could words express the recognition which this devoted courage will win for them from the assemblies of the brethren throughout the Catholic world, or what hope or confidence it will merit for them before Christ as their Judge, or what reward it will obtain from Him in the heavenly kingdom! And we, ourselves, in every lawful way, shall continue to promote their reconciliation with the Church, in whom individuals and masses, may find so much for their imitation, as we (so) ardently desire.⁷

May God bless our patrimony and the formative Anglicans who have contributed so much to its legacy; and may the gifts which He has given lead beyond themselves to our place before our Mother, the only Bride of the Lamb, for whom among all creatures our Lord Himself has waited and worked.

Thank you.

⁷ *Apostolicae Curae* paragraph 39. Solemnly promulgated by Pope Leo XIII, November 21, 1964.