



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – February 2010

Anglo-Catholics & the See of Peter

ANGLO-CATHOLIC is one of those labels which proves so tricky to define. It nearly always gets changed to 'high church' by the media, who mean by it people who like 'smells and bells', 'fancy' worship rather than 'plain' worship. The first people to use the term, however, the 'Tractarians', were not especially interested in bells, and would certainly not have burned incense. Back in 1838, the first use of the term in English, the emphasis was on the continuity of the Church of England with the Church of apostolic times. The Church, the Tractarians said, was a divine society and not an instrument of the state. The ministry of the Church and her sacraments were holy, catholic, and apostolic.

There was an early division among the Tractarians, what was called a 'parting of friends'. Some, notably John Henry Newman, were led by their theological explorations to become Roman Catholics. Others, notably John Keble and Edward Bouverie Pusey, took refuge in the 'Branch Theory', the idea that Rome, Constantinople (the Orthodox), and Canterbury were all ancient churches, sharing the ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon, descended from the apostles, and the sacraments, ordained by Christ. Tragically divided, in human terms, these 'branches', the Anglo-Catholics said, were nonetheless branches of the One Vine, in a way that Methodists and Baptists, say, were not (because they have no bishops and a different view of sacraments).

Throughout the twentieth century there was a continuing exploration of what it might take for the main 'branches' to recognise one another. Rome have talked to the Orthodox. Anglicans have talked to Rome, and to the Orthodox. In addition there have been extensive dialogues and conversations with churches of the Reformation, what we tend to call 'nonconformists'. Since 1966, when Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI met in Rome, there has been particular enthusiasm for ARCIC – the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission – and we were never more optimistic about reunion in the West than in 1982, when Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Robert Runcie knelt together to pray in Canterbury Cathedral. In 1995 the Pope issued an Encyclical Letter, *Ut Unum Sint* ('That they may all be one' [John 17]), inviting Christians separated from Rome to explain just what they required to change before they were re-united with the Holy See.

The latest initiative, *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, this year, is yet another invitation from the Holy See to Anglicans to return in groups. Our day of prayer on 22nd February, the Chair of Peter, is our opportunity to think about this, in the company of Our Lord himself, and, where possible, with Roman Catholics. It is not a day of decision but a day of prayer. Though it is addressed to Anglicans in general, the particular focus of *Anglicanorum Coetibus* is, of course, Anglo-Catholics. We are the ones who have longed for the re-union of the Catholic Church. We are the ones who, with candles, and devotions, and incense, and music, and prayers, and vestments have got as close as we can to Roman Catholic practice. That's the 'high church' bit. More important, we are the ones who in matters of faith and morals – what we believe about the Gospel, the Creeds, the Ministry, and the Sacraments - and how we live – have always claimed to be 'Catholic'. Do we mean it? And, if we do, what do we do about it? Individually and in groups. That's what we are saying our prayers about.

May the prayers of Our Lady of Walsingham, St Therese and John Henry Newman assist us as we seek to discover and build unity in the Church of Jesus Christ.

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