

Pentecost

Should Anglicans Consider Affiliation with Rome?

A treatise by Larry W. Johnson

When I read in The Washington Post of the decision of St. Luke Episcopal Church to become Roman Catholic, I was surprised by the reasons they gave: They were seeking the central authority which the Pope provides. They do not like Anglican organizational structure where "bishops have their own 'kingdom.'" When asked the inevitable question of whether they are against women and/or gay clergy, the leaders of their congregation reply that it was not that which prompted them, but rather, they feel they have corrected "500 years of history."

My opinion was asked regarding an Episcopal Church in Maryland melding into the Catholic Church. At first I dismissed it; on the face of it, another denomination's parish move to Rome seemed hardly worth noticing. But the more I thought about it, the more important this movement became; it is indeed relevant to the life of the Continuing Church.

This is not the first time I have written my opinion regarding the Pope's actions to invite Anglican/Episcopal priests and bishops to Rome. I said before this is sheep stealing and is an attempt to further fracture an already fractured method of faith. It is Rome once again declaring war on Anglicanism.

Perhaps it would be good to reflect briefly on the history that led to the first fracture of our faith. Anglican history, buried in dusty alcoves of old libraries, needs to be read again.

There were from the beginning inherent problems of the central authority of the Pope. A case in point is my own relative, Jon Hus, a Czech priest from Prague.

In the fifteenth century Jon Hus pointed out the corruption of the Catholic Church. At the time there were a number of "Popes" fighting for power and advocating that they were the legitimate Pope. Authority was to be determined by might and not necessarily who or what was right or godly. Each wanted to be the central authority and laid claim to the Holy See.

Jon Hus unleashed his voice against the Catholic Church's selling of indulgences and corrupt priests and bishops. He believed the Gospel should be read in the vernacular of the people and promoted the unheard of idea that the people should be allowed to receive the bread and the Cup. The Cup was for the clergy only.

In 1415, Jon was excommunicated and declared an outlaw, but eventually offered a hearing. Upon believing a commitment of safe passage to meet with the Pope and Council he journeyed to Constance. He was deceived by the false promise of a free and fair hearing before the Pope's Council and instead was captured and held prisoner and finally burned at the stake. He was so hated by the established Church that his bone fragments were chopped into little pieces and with his ashes tossed into the Rhine.

Before the burning he was jeered in the court, shouted down, not allowed to defend himself. He was scalped, defrocked, humiliated, declared a heretic, and his books burned. Not until 1999 did Rome apologize for his treatment – six-hundred and ninety-six years later.

Moving history forward, Henry VIII wanted a divorce in order to acquire another wife. Despite the fact that the Pope had accommodated other heads of state, he denied the request. Henry therefore left the Church of Rome, taking England with him. While practically everyone knows that Henry was a womanizer, few realize that there was much corruptness of the Pope to whom Henry was appealing. The Pope was playing politics to keep himself in power. His decisions were made in order to keep the army on his side; he was not concerned with what might be best for the English people. The English monarchy's need for a male heir was paramount and Henry's wives had not produced a son. There is more to the history, of course, but suffice it to say the purposes of England were different from those of the Pope.

Following Henry's death the history of Bloody Mary's rise to power is well known. She returned the Church of England to the Roman Catholic Faith under the authority of the Pope. It is not often taught that she slaughtered hundreds of Englishmen who would not bow the knee to Rome. At Smithfield alone there were three hundred Englishmen burned at the stake. There were executions throughout England. She died after a four year reign and her sister Elizabeth came to power restoring the independence of the Church of England and seeing to it that the English Prayer Book was the standard throughout the kingdom. The restored Anglican Church has served the people of England in excellent fashion for over four-hundred years. The English have taken their Faith to the far corners of the world not the least of which was making the Anglican Faith the first faith of the United States of America.

During these past five hundred years and until recently the Anglican Church has, for the most part, kept heresy out of the Church. It is only in these past thirty years that the problem of weak bishops allowing changes in the faith to accommodate "modern society" has occurred. Yes, today there are problems in the Anglican Communion; but Anglicans can still worship as they have since the time of the first Prayer Book if they wish, and if they don't, that too can be accommodated in the Episcopal Church. Anglicans who crave the Church as it was can move to a bishop of strong moral beliefs without fear of reprisal, excommunication or committing mortal sin.

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This "correction" will cause them to have to pay homage to a foreign sovereign and "tax collector" ... which was part of the English problem of Henry and Elizabeth in the sixteenth century.

Philip Jenkins, professor at Pennsylvania State University, who I read from time to time, commented, "St. Luke's is seeking the Roman Church of fifty years ago.

For the past thirty- some years, Anglicans have struggled to adhere to the faith of their forefathers. Now Rome is taking advantage of that struggle. St. Luke's decision coincided with the stepped-up efforts by the Vatican to reach out to Anglicans (sheep stealing).

Others have already taken the Pope up on his offer; folks in the pews and priests and bishops. But what will they find as "new Catholics"? First of all, Bishops will no longer be bishops; they will be priests. This generation of married Anglican priests will be accepted, but there will be no new married priests. Those who might have considered the priesthood will have to consider they cannot marry and will have to take the vow of celibacy; most likely that is not all that will be lost – over time all Anglican forms of worship and tradition will disappear as well. What about previous oaths by the presently converting priests which uphold Anglican Articles that set forth protections against Papal Authority? I assume the converting priests and bishops must renounce their vows. Who will release them from their vows? When is an oath a vow?

With this open invitation to Anglicans, is there a sense of Catholicism becoming once again the world religion it was? For those now converting will there be freedom for those who have "buyers' remorse" to reverse their decision without threat of mortal sin?

If, en mass, Anglicans and Episcopalians turn to Rome, will there ever be a sermon preached pointing out errors of Papal decisions? The Pope from the Vatican runs an empire. Who keeps in-check corruption and strange and unwholesome practices and moral decisions in the Roman See? Do Cardinals speak out? Do clergy risk all as Hus did? Are laity given a firm and sure voice? Former acolytes have had to go it alone for the most part to put "in to check" modern abuses. To his credit the Pope is now responding, but largely after the fact.

We Anglicans have our own challenges. The Catholic Church does not have a monopoly on corrupt priests and bishops. Will we keep our Anglican Church on the proper track? Are we strong enough for that? Or do we cling together in silence when one among us has become corrupt? To turn the spotlight on ourselves is the hardest.

In the meantime, there is the fact that Rome wants our people. Instead of encouraging lost and drifting Anglicans to seek out one of the many Anglican churches that clings properly and faithfully to the tenets of the faith, the Pope seeks to divide us. Perhaps a counter insurgency is in order. We could invite Roman Catholics to convert to the Anglican Faith. We can put out word that we will receive Catholic priests who desire a normal family life and who want to practice their faith the Anglican Way.

We can invite Catholics to consider an ancient tradition that offers freedom and discipline of the Cross of Jesus exercised in each diocese and not controlled by an earthly authority far away. Our form of worship provides the freedom to use the most beautiful Liturgy in the world and the first to be offered in the vernacular of the parishioners. After all, our form of worship today is closer to the Catholic faith of old than any church they are in today. Joining us, Catholics can become a part of a Church that has led the way for Biblical teaching by placing a Bible in the language of the people in every church building for the past four-hundred plus years.

But wait – isn't that sheep stealing? Don't we as Anglicans leave such decisions up to the heart of the individual as prompted by God Himself. Yes, I think so.

Anglicans lead the Way to Christ and will continue to do so in the centuries to come.

Though the Anglican Church is open to all, including Catholics, who consider my invitation to join, we will not emulate the Pope and encourage it.

I wonder what the departing St. Luke's has corrected.

As for me, I choose to remain a part of the Anglican Church and practice my faith the way I believe God founded and intended it to serve Him.

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