

So what is an Anglo-Catholic?

It is a question I am often asked. We advertise ourselves as such in the *Post and Courier*, on our web page, and in advertisements in church periodicals that have a national circulation. So that news is out there. We claim our Catholic identity and heritage. But do we always understand? Is it the same as *being high church*? Does it mean that we have more ritual? Well, not exactly.

The first thing we must understand is that Anglo-Catholicism isn't in any way a matter of *taste* or *style*. If that were the case, we could well be accused of being frivolous and superficial. One of the fatal flaws of the mega-church movement (*Willow Creek*, and places like it) is that it caters to that true American god, *choice*. The logic runs like this:

More people like Rock bands than classical music. More people like a casual atmosphere than a formal one. Most people are not intellectual and they watch TV more than they read books, so sermons should be anecdotal, funny, and sentimental. It is easier to read a power-point presentation on a screen than fumble with a prayer book. Therefore, we will make church look just like what people want. It's as simple as that. We will do it, and we will grow.

The fatal flaw in this strategy is that giving people what they *want* is an ever-moving target. Tastes change more quickly than the weather. Furthermore, giving people what they *want* may not be helpful. In fact, it may even be destructive. I am convinced, that in terms of what passes for Christianity in many places, it is destructive because it re-enforces the subtle, and yet ever so insidious notion, that worship is about us. Worship is never about us. It is never about what *we can get out of it*. It isn't a product to be produced nor consumed, bought nor sold.

Likewise, our Catholic faith is not about taste. It is not simply that we like incense while others do not (*smoking or non-smoking?* the waiter might ask). We are Catholics and we worship as we do because we have a profound belief that God demands our best efforts, and that a liturgy that has come down to us unchanged in its essentials for two thousand years is a gift. We are stewards of a treasure, not innovators who must tinker and experiment.

So if not about preference nor taste, what defines us? To answer this question, we must go back nearly 170 years ago. A group of Anglican priests and scholars began what would eventually be called *The Oxford Movement* on July 14, 1833. Having studied the Fathers of the ancient church, they determined that the Church of England, in all of its essentials, was the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. It was not, as some of their contemporaries believed, merely the *Department of Religion* of the English Government. They set about writing pamphlets called *Tracts for Our Times* (from whence they received the nickname, *Tractarians*). These helped to educate the public to certain truths that had, for various reasons, been neglected or forgotten.

First among these truths was that Anglicans are not Protestants. The Reformation, they taught, over-reacted to medieval abuses and did away with much that was essential to the nature of the church. Those Anglicans who emphasized a Reformation heritage were mistaken, and Anglo-Catholics had a missionary task in restoring a proper understanding to the whole Communion.

Secondly, Anglo-Catholics rejoiced that the Apostolic Succession had been preserved for us, thereby insuring the validity of our Sacraments. Without this gift of Holy Orders, an ecclesial body could not properly be called *church per se*.

Thirdly, they cherished the gift of *Common Prayer*. Archbishop Cranmer's liturgy in English (particularly the 1549 book, which is the basis of our own parish Eucharist) clearly preserved the teaching, shape and practice of the Holy Eucharist of the ancient church.

In short, Anglo-Catholics believe and worship as they do because they are heirs of the very same church that

was founded by Jesus Christ. This is a very different thing than picking a church that makes us "feel good." We reject *choice* because there IS no other choice! Like Simon Peter, we say to Jesus, *Lord, to whom (else) would we turn? You have the words of eternal life.*

This is but a brief summary. I should like to write more in the future about the implications of our Catholic Faith, but let it suffice for me to close with this: If we don't know who we are, we can't fulfill our mission. We are called to make Christ known, and to bring others into the Kingdom. That is why we must be sure of our foundational understanding of the faith, for we cannot call others into that which we don't fully understand. Let us continue the vibrant Anglo-Catholic witness that we have inherited, preaching the Word urgently, administering the sacraments faithfully, serving the poor obediently, and praying for a continual growth in our own understanding, that we may *show forth his praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives.*

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