
The Church, Which is His Body

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Atlanta, Georgia
The Last Sunday After Pentecost

"The Church, which is his body." -Ephesians 1:22,23

While I was in seminary, so many years ago, I also served at a local church, a great church. I probably learned more about liturgy and life in that particular church than I did in seminary classes. It was Christ Church, New Haven, Connecticut, one of the great high-church, Anglo-Catholic parishes in the United States.

"High-church" and "Anglo-Catholic" mean that the church stressed formal and ceremonial liturgy, with incense, and beautiful vestments, and sung prayers, and intentional choreography about how we moved around the altar. I remember some services where the only thing we did not sing was the sermon; we even sang the lessons.

I think of that church whenever I hear Ephesians, chapter one, and the curious phrase that we heard this morning, at verse 22 and 23: "the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

"For the church, which is his body." At Christ Church, New Haven, that phrase was printed on every Sunday bulletin, and in every weekly newsletter. On every official document, it seemed, the church printed that same little logo and tagline. "The church, which is his body."

Now, remember another feature of high-church, Anglo-Catholic parishes, like Christ Church, New Haven. They truly adore the Body of Christ at the Eucharist, or Mass, as some people call it. A high doctrine of Holy Eucharist, meant that we always reserved the blessed sacrament, keeping it in a gorgeous gold tabernacle, always lit with special candles. Every time, and I mean every time, we walked in front of that tabernacle, we genuflected. We didn't just bow; we genuflected. Because the Body of Christ was there. It deserved reverence.

At Evensong every Sunday, we did not just sing the office. We participated in a very rare Anglican service called Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Even most Roman Catholic churches do not use that rite! In that deeply reverent service, with much bowing and scraping, the celebrant would remove the Blessed Sacrament from the Tabernacle" outside of a Mass" and elevate the Host. They called it The Exposition of the Body of Christ. And, then, at the conclusion of this service, the Celebrant would actually bless the people with the Blessed Sacrament. So it occurred that the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament became the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

It was actually quite beautiful; and it still is, in some places; though I realize some of us are feeling a bit creepy as I describe it. Right?

We all know that that kind of thing can become altogether too precious. Dramatic ceremonial, and quirky attention to liturgical detail so often seems dis-engaged with the real world, unconnected with how people on the streets are really

living. It can seem like so much fussiness about things that don't really matter. Does Jesus really exist in all that ceremonial hoopla?

Let me tell you, then, the other thing about Christ Church, New Haven. The great thing about this church was, and still is, that it indeed connected with the real world and how people on the streets are living. When I was there, we hosted one of the city's major soup kitchens. We were right at the edge of a tough section of town, and New Haven is a tough town. We always had street people attending services, and often collapsing during the services. (Remind me to tell you the story one day of what happened when we saw one of the street people smoking a cigarette in the first row of chairs!)

The truth is that Christ Church really did clothe the naked and feed the hungry and welcome the stranger. It was a beautiful thing. As much as our liturgy might have seemed serenely removed from the troubling and messy life of the world, the work of the people really did include an aggressive ministry with the poor. Ephesians 1:22-23 was written on the church literature, "the church, which is his body;" but the daily parish life lived out Matthew 25: "I was poor and you gave me something to eat, something to drink, something to wear; I was a stranger and you welcomed me, in prison and you visited me."

It so happens that nineteenth century Anglo-Catholicism and ritualism has its roots in some of the poorest areas of London—the East—the London docks. The Reverend Charles Lowder, who first served St. George's Parish in the London East Docks, also started St. Peter's Church, London East Docks; and he deliberately created that parish in the worst slums of London.

Charles Lowder was a severe Anglo-Catholic. So ritualistic was Charles Lowder that he may have been the first Anglican priest in London to wear Eucharistic vestments (that is, the chasuble that you see almost every American Episcopal priest wearing now). No one dared make that an issue with Father Lowder because he was so obviously serving the poorest of the poor. One story goes that he found a thief one Sunday in the church; rather than have him arrested, Lowder served him hot cocoa and began a holy relationship with him; and within a few weeks the former thief had become a regular server at the high altar.

Other clergy followed. The Anglo-Catholic revival, a revival of ceremonial and vestments and candles and dramatic liturgy, was at its height in the poorest areas of the city. The poor actually came to churches which focused on beauty and ceremonial. Why did so many of the poor and uneducated and illiterate people come to church? They couldn't read the prayer book or the hymnal! How could they follow the service?

Ah, but they did follow the service! The Anglo-Catholic clergy realized that beautiful liturgy and high drama was its own language. Ceremonial ritual could be understood even by people who could not read or write. The power of ritual and sacrament could be just as powerful as the word.

That principle became the great contribution of Anglo-Catholics, High Church Anglicans, to the wider Anglican Communion. Books and words have their place in our tradition, but so do the sacramental acts of beauty and truth and intention that go beyond words.

So, what do these two things have in common: the ritualistic Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and the feeding and clothing of the poor in London's East End? What they have in common is that they both give attention to the Body of Christ. They pay attention to the Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ is, somehow, mystically and sacramentally, in this communion bread each Sunday. AND, the Body of Christ is, somehow, mystically and sacramentally, in the poor that we feed and clothe each week. We pay attention to both.

Matthew, chapter 25, our gospel for today, says quite clearly that Jesus, the great King, is one of the least of these around us. If we feed the hungry, we are feeding Jesus. If we welcome the stranger, we are welcoming Jesus. If we visit the prisoner, we are visiting Jesus.

Sometimes we understand this mystical identity quite well. At our annual Requiem Eucharist for the Homeless, we welcome many, many homeless strangers into this Cathedral. In so doing, as many of you know, we are welcoming Jesus;

and that service is a beautiful foretaste of the kingdom of heaven.

Other times we are not so good at it. The least of these around us, on the streets of Atlanta, and elsewhere, deserve our attention. We are called to pay attention. We pay attention on All Saints Day; what if we also paid attention on Thanksgiving Day? The Body of Christ deserves our attention.

When we honor the Body of Christ on the high altar, we practice the art of paying attention. High Church Anglo-Catholics understand this. Reverence for the consecrated host is related to reverence for the body of Christ which is the whole people of God. The Church, which is his Body.

So, at communion, we say "The Body of Christ." The Bread of Heaven. The Bread of Life. And the Body of Christ is also out there, in the prisons of Atlanta. The Body of Christ, the Church, holds all of us together. It is who we serve, here at this altar, and it is who we serve in the streets of Atlanta.

AMEN.

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