
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: What Do We Mean When We Talk About Anglican Consciousness?

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

In your last note you asked what I mean when I speak of “Anglican consciousness.”

Urban T. Holmes, in his little book *What Is Anglicanism?* says it is not a system of doctrines so much as a way of inhabiting tensions. Anglicans are marked, he says, by a dialectical imagination, able to hold opposites together until grace shows its face.

Think of how we read Scripture: we prize study and scholarship, yet we also chant psalms and linger over poetry. Or how we approach the sacraments: we trust that bread and wine truly bear Christ’s presence, but we do not insist on explaining how. We live with paradox, and that is our strength. Holmes even calls it a “poetic” sensibility—truth discovered by resonance more than by argument.

This instinct goes back to the early monks who entered the desert in the third and fourth centuries to live more truthfully. They discovered that solitude needed community, silence needed speech, prayer needed service. They taught that tensions are not problems to be solved but invitations to wisdom.

So when I speak of Anglican consciousness, I mean a way of life that holds mystery and reason, solitude and companionship, earthiness and transcendence, in creative tension. It is less about solving and more about staying—remaining with the questions, the prayers, the people—until God’s grace becomes apparent to us.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames