

THE CONGRESS OF TRADITIONAL ANGLICANS

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An Address by

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**After the Evening Banquet on Ascension Day
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My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Faithful Anglicans, faithful former Anglicans, faithful future Anglicans, erstwhile journalists, ladies and gentlemen, Christians all and anyone who may have wandered into this gathering. I think that these opening words should signal to everyone that I regard this meeting as a fairly typical Anglican assembly. The Anglican tent always embraces much and many.

I would like to thank my hosts for inviting me to address this congress of Continuing Anglicans. It was a surprise to receive that invitation and I accept it with as much gracious humility as this somewhat sleep-deprived cleric can muster. I only regret that I can't stay for the full four days of this gathering. My son graduates from college on Saturday and I will need to fly back home late tomorrow evening. But I do appreciate all the kindnesses and courtesies extended to me. I am a stranger and you have taken me in.

This evening, will talk about the Continuing Anglican world (such as I can only imagine it to be), the Apostolic Constitution (also known as *Anglicanorum Coetibus*) and a possible way forward for us all. Some may find what I have to say mildly controversial; others may find it rather tame; some may find it brilliantly perceptive; still others may find it completely objectionable. I hope there is something here for everyone. I would regard it as a success if there were. And I pray that the journalists here present find a bit of controversy in my words. That will, above all else, signal success.

The continuing churches are now some thirty-five years old. Most date their origins from the Congress of St. Louis. Most also subscribe to the Affirmation of St. Louis, a seminal document in the history of our churches. That document, along with the other documents of our particular heritage helps us understand who we are as Anglicans. As Continuing Anglicans, we share a great deal in common. As the saying goes: "More unites us than divides us."

But almost immediately following the Congress of St. Louis, fractures in the continuing movement began to appear. Perhaps this was inevitable. We are Anglicans, after all, and the term "herding cats" certainly originated in Reformation England. Even so, the motives in our

origins, while sometimes of the best, were often questionable. Some men demonstrated a craven desire to wear purple shirts. Others saw a way in which they could create the one true church. Still others simply wanted to worship God in peace, far away from ecclesiastical warfare. The alphabet soup began to form. How many alphabetical combinations are there now? Their proliferation seems to be increasing at nearly the rate the universe is expanding. Some people are troubled by the great number of continuing jurisdictions that exist. I confess that the number of continuing jurisdictions does not trouble me one bit. You may be puzzled by this, but we must remember that God will grow the jurisdictions that seek genuinely to preach the word of God. Those others will simply fall away.

The history of the continuum has been told and retold. Many of us here have lived it. There are likely as many versions of that story as there are participants. I myself have written a little book about the first twenty-five years of the Continuing Anglican movement. I titled that book (without a shed of irony) *Saints and Buccaneers*. I invite you to read it—and to argue about it.

But let's leave the history behind for a moment and look at things from a slightly different perspective. As some of you know, I have studied and have taught the plays of William Shakespeare. I have also appeared in many of his plays; I've directed others and have come to the conclusion that this great playwright internalized the Christian message fully and completely. Because I know many of the plays quite well, I am sometimes asked which ones I like best. Well, there are certainly the great ones like Hamlet or (my own preference) King Lear. These are on everyone's list. But I also include a rather unusual play, one called Cymbeline. I like this play very much. Most critics don't know quite what to make of it. Is it a comedy, they wonder? Is it a romance? Perhaps it is a problem play. But one thing seems clear: it's quite a mess. The plot is hard to follow. The story is full of intrigue and deception, replete with strange and confusing plot twists. It has double-dealing, disguise, murder and mayhem. Until the very end, you're not really sure who are the heroes and who are the villains. In other words, it is the story of the Anglican Continuum. But a very strange and wonderful thing happens at the end of Cymbeline. Most of the characters are brought onto the stage. And they begin to show themselves for who they really are. Disguises are removed. The faces of all the players are revealed. They become their true selves. Without artifice or deception, the characters in this strange and mystical play come together in a spirit of love and reconciliation. They clear up all the plot devices. They laugh at their antics and they speak the truth of who they are. The plot has been silly, sometimes fanciful, sometimes improbable. But at the end, the characters come together in love. They recognize their frailty and vulnerability and, after all they have been through, they are no longer afraid to be available to each other. Could that happen here? It is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Will we come together in some way to do the work of God and learn to love each other? All eccentricities notwithstanding.

Our history has included many attempts to draw us all together. There have been trial mergers, inter-communion arrangements and schemes of absorption that fill our sometimes improbable story. There has been a fair amount of sheep stealing and empire building. The cast of characters has included the saintly prelate and the thief, the godly bishop and the criminal. What a story. One wonders how we could possibly have survived thirty-five years. God has somehow allowed it to happen. Perhaps God has a great sense of humor. Or perhaps He just simply loves us. And has given us all the time we need to love Him—and to love each other.

Even so, we might have gone on for years, repeating our standard pattern. We might have continued the practice splitting, stealing, forming and reforming until we ran out of letters in the alphabet. How many times, after all, can we use words like “Anglican,” “Catholic,” “Orthodox,” “Traditional,” “Province” and “Episcopal” in some sort of combination? And have them make sense? Perhaps, eventually, we will see the creation of the “Anglican Catholic Apostolic Orthodox Episcopal Traditional Province of the Known Universe.” Don't even try to figure out the acronym.

Yes, all that might have continued. We might have gone on our merry way. Except that a year and a half ago, we received something called *Anglicanorum Coetibus* or the *Apostolic Constitution*. It has been called a great gift. And it is! It is a great gift to the Anglican world because it has asked us to look at ourselves and to decide, with God's help, whether we are truly Anglican or not. *Anglicanorum coetibus* has demanded that we consider whether the Anglican world is worth preserving—or whether it might better be folded into the welcoming arms of the Roman Catholic Church. Which will it be?

What makes us Anglican? Where do we look to find the specific formula that defines Anglicanism? Can we define Anglicanism with the Scholastic specificity that might define, for example, the Roman Catholic Church? Search as we might, it is simply not there. We are not a confessional faith. We resist being pinned down, wriggling on a wall. We like the mysteries that exist in the theological cracks; the mysteries of which only God knows the answers. How, then, do we understand Anglicanism? There is no ready formula; Anglicanism is not an “easy” branch of Christianity.

But we do have guidelines. Scripture is primary. Then, we would add the Creeds. And, if we accept the old saw of “Scripture, Tradition and Reason;” well, that it a part of it, too. But the Book of Common Prayer is a better guide still. It is saturated with Scripture. Thomas Cranmer saw to that. As E.W. Benson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said in 1890: “Read your Bible and your Prayer Book. We are convinced,” he went on, “that our Prayer Book is the true interpreter” of Holy Scripture. The Anglican theologian, Henry R. McAdoo, adds: “In other words, liturgy with its declared doctrinal content is part of the air breathed by the worshipping and serving community” of Anglicans. (H.R. McAdoo. *The Unity of Anglicanism*. Wilton, Connecticut, 1983. p. 51.) As Continuing Anglicans, we also have the Affirmation of St. Louis. And, whether we accept them with enthusiasm, mild interest or disdain, we do have the Articles of Religion. While we could add more documents, such as the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, which attempted to define (however broadly) the essence of Anglicanism, these several documents point us on our way. Anglicanism cannot be pinned down with Scholastic particularity. It is elusive. It is a little like jazz. I happen to be a fan of jazz. And I am quite sure God is, too. The Anglican way—the way of our hearts and minds—leads us to God; gently, often mysteriously, but (for those who pick up the mantle of true Anglicanism) fiercely and relentlessly. God has called us to be Anglicans. God has called us to this place.

In 2007, thirty or so Anglican bishops of the Traditional Anglican Communion gathered in Portsmouth, England. While there, they signed what has come to be known as the “Portsmouth Petition.” This petition asked of the Roman Catholic Church that a way be found for full,

corporate union with the Holy See. Several statements were made that document that have been quoted and misquoted ever since. But all the petition asked was this: show us a way we may gain inter-communion; full, visible communion without absorption.

Yes, there was that oft-quoted statement about the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church being the most complete statement of Catholic faith and that “we aspire to teach it.” Aspiring to teach something does not mean that it is embraced fully and completely. I taught Shakespeare for years and found the man's grammatical leaps often impossibly bizarre.

Anglicanorum Coetibus was released in late 2009. It was written in response to several petitions that had been sent to the Vatican over the years. Each one hoped for some sort of inter-communion. Several months after *Anglicanorum Coetibus* was published, many of us received a form letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Those of us who received that letter also received official copies of The Apostolic Constitution, as well as the Complementary Norms and (for good measure) an additional commentary.

These documents were regarded as a “definitive” response by the Holy See. This definitive response referenced the catechism as the central document around which reunion with Rome could come to pass. There was no mention of Scripture, the Book of Common Prayer or other Anglican documents. The way and manner of Anglicanism was either ignore misunderstood or misrepresented by those who drafted these Vatican documents.

Anglicanorum coetibus is a way that Anglicans may enter the Roman Catholic Church. But by so doing, they will cease to be Anglican. The way is open for all who seek that path. There are no barriers. But wouldn't it be far more honest for those who are so inclined to simply walk into the nearest Roman Catholic Church and begin a process of conversion?

For many Anglicans, our path is very clear. We are Anglican because God has called us to this place. He has called us to a ministry in this part of His vineyard. While we certainly pray for the unity of God's church, we know as well that, as in John 17, true unity is spiritual unity, not political unity. God's people are truly unified when they can affirm, as Jesus asked us to affirm, that God the Father and Jesus are one. That is what He asked. No less a theologian than Richard Hooker wrote that God's church is one when all affirm that God the Father and God the Son are indeed one. That is unity. That is unity with an Anglican emphasis. That is unity with a Christian emphasis.

Where then is the gift in *Anglicanorum Coetibus*? Because there is a gift. There is a very specific gift for Anglicans. And it may not be what many people think it is. The very phrase *Anglicanorum coetibus* means “groups of Anglicans” or “a gathering of Anglicans.” Well, here we are. A gathering of Anglicans. We have come together to celebrate our Anglican heritage. We have come together to celebrate our particular journey as the Anglican Continuum. We are a group of Anglicans. We are bound together in a common heritage. We are bound together in a knowledge and love of God and a fierce devotion to the Holy Scripture and the Book of Common Prayer. It is our way. And God has called us here!

How many continuing jurisdictions exist? Does anyone really know? But for the sake of argument, let us say there are twelve—a Biblical number. These jurisdictions are widely scattered. They exist in separation; they maintain limited contact with each other. Dry bones in the valley. Dry bones. Scattered and alone. Shall these bones live? Only God knows. Ezekiel spoke of other dry bones once long ago. The scattered tribes of Israel also lived' isolation. They too existed without mutual cooperation. The question Ezekiel asked in the metaphor of the dry bones—a metaphor as pertinent today as it was when it was written—can we pull together? Can we share our gifts? Can we help each other? It is only through love that we begin to reclaim the life that God has given to us. It is only through love that we recognize, offer and receive our mutual gifts. Can these bones live?

This evening, I do not ask anyone here to sign great charters or to effect grand mergers or to come together under the leadership of some great uber Anglican primate. Let's face it; that's not Anglican. We couldn't tolerate that. Rather, I ask simply that we recognize and honor the presence of each other. I ask that we assist each other, helping each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. And I ask that we pray for each other.

If we can do this much, we will indeed have accomplished an Anglican miracle. And God will surely smile on our efforts.

Shall these bones live? Oh, God, you know.

We have come together in this place and at this time for a purpose. God knows that purpose better than you or I. This is God's church. And I pray that we are given the gift of discernment to find the purpose for which we have been called together.

We have been on a strange and eventful journey these past thirty-five years. Like the characters in the play, *Cymbeline*, we may be an odd and eccentric bunch. But perhaps it is time for us to come together in all truthfulness, revealing ourselves as we are—as children of God. God has allowed us to survive. We are here where God has called us to be. As Samuel Johnson once said: “The Lord God put us here to do something, not just stare about.”

Now, at this time in our history, *Anglicanorum coetibus* has given us a great gift. Perhaps it is a gift of understanding, a gift of greater knowledge of the Anglican way. It has called out groups of Anglicans; it has promised unity. In the Anglican understanding of unity, such unity may be as simple as offering each other the gifts we have received on our separate journeys over the past thirty-five years. It may be nothing more than to greet each other in love and charity, to recognize that we are children of God who have been given a great task to fulfill. Perhaps that task is to teach the love that Anglicans can truly express.

Many of you know the story I am about to tell. It is about a great theologian and a simple expression of faith. Karl Barth was once challenged about his faith—seriously challenged. “How can you know?” he was asked. “How can you know this Christian way is true?” “How can you believe things such as the ‘bodily resurrection’?” Barth was a patient man, but he had had enough. But he didn't get angry. He simply paused for a long time, took a deep breath and

sang that old hymn many of us learned as children: “Jesus loves me this I know; for the Bible tells me so.”

In commemoration of Professor Barth's conclusion, I will also end with a song. But I will choose an Anglican verse, one that will be sung as long as there are Anglicans on God's good earth. The tune is an old English folk song. It was arranged, as so many of our great hymns have been, by the incomparable Ralph Vaughan-Williams. I would ask that you focus only on the words—and not on my sometimes questionable grasp of tone, pitch and meter:

That we may feed the poor aright,
And gath'ring round thy throne
Here, in the holy angels sight,
Repay thee of thine own:
That we may praise thee all our days,
And with the Father's Name
And with the Holy Spirit's gifts,
The Saviour's love proclaim.
Amen.