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From: Fr Thomas Fraser

Sent: Tuesday, June 02, 2015 11:48 PM

To: St Paul's Parishioners

Subject: The Real Difference

We have talked since the early 1980's about the differences between St Paul's and conventional suburban Episcopal parishes. We have explored their ramifications and tried to find effective, succinct, and accessible ways of describing these differences that could be generally understood. We have used terms such as:

- "religious community" (rather than program-driven parish) paradigm, which means programs focused on formation for worship and ministry (rather than driven by whatever would seem to attract new members/pledgers)
- "Benedictine spirituality" (rather than a vague "bridge church" least common denominator spirituality) which includes stability of community life with long-term relationships (rather than "revolving door" parish membership) and God-centered *conversatio morum* ["conversion of life"] (rather than individual-centered "give the lady what she wants")
- "authentic historic Anglicanism" (rather than insubstantial, directionless "diversity and inclusivity")
- "countercultural" (rather than American WASP popular culture)
- "Benedictine Catholic liturgy" (rather than either Anglo-Catholic or "Anglican cathedral" liturgy)
- "destination congregation" (rather than a local geographic-parish church)
- "pastorally orthodox" (rather than either left-wing PC trendy or right-wing punitively rigid)
- "Christian, Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal in that order" (rather than denominational jingoism)
- "corporate historic theology as the criterion for all things" (rather than individual emotional criteria for everything)
- "there is no authentic commitment without the freedom to explore" (rather than "questioning is a sign of faithlessness and disloyalty")

All of these descriptions convey significant truth about the life and culture of St Paul's, Riverside. They give full disclosure about the nature of St Paul's life to inquirers as well as help newcomers understand what they experience here. However, the real difference, I believe, between St Paul's and conventional suburban Episcopal parishes – the one thing from which all other differences come – is St Paul's pre-Constantinian church paradigm versus the conventional Episcopal post-Constantinian church paradigm.

I received in the mail today a newsletter from a diocesan parish that apparently is in a serious financial crisis. The newsletter presented the agenda for an up-coming meeting with all parishioners to discuss the possible options for the parish – none of which they would find pleasant and some of which would be extreme. The newsletter notes that the 2015 parish budget, which is seriously under funded, is "no frills." If the parish's present life is to continue, the Finance Committee advises, this gap must be closed by substantial additional funding.

This parish is only one of many, if not most, Episcopal parishes in the United States today (many small; some once-great “cardinal parishes”) that are facing the reality that they can no longer financially maintain their post-Constantinian church life. As I have seen it develop, this consciousness has often followed a Kubler-Ross process of denial/anger/bargaining.

- Denial was the attitude that the decline-in-the-church/increase-in-secularism was a temporary phenomenon that we would come out of in a few years.

- Anger was blaming the decline on the Rector who could not preach well enough to bring in people or the Episcopal Church’s “liberalism” or “conservatism.”

- Bargaining (seemingly now the most prevalent stage) is trying to use gimmicks and/or watering down the faith and life of the Church in order to attract the secular (including “spiritual but not religious”) majority

All of the attempts I have seen to deal with this frightening ubiquitous crisis in the life of the institutional church have been ways of trying to maintain post-Constantinian church life, with almost nothing sacred and everything “for sale.”

Virtually no one seems to do the only thing that I believe will bring “acceptance,” as well as resolution of this problem, which is adopting a fundamental paradigm shift from a post-Constantinian vision/life to a pre-Constantinian vision/life. It is my experience, however, that no congregation can face this “radical surgery” until it clearly sees that the only alternative is its foreseeable institutional death. My concern is that so many congregations have gotten beyond the point of no return when they see this, and it is simply too late for a fundamental parochial paradigm shift.

A pre-Constantinian church paradigm is completely congruent with authentic historic Anglican culture. It actually is, as Father Robert Gallagher puts it, “our DNA.” The Constantinian establishment in the Fourth Century radically altered the life of the Church, resulting in a popular and all-too-often casual form of Christianity that increasingly became conformed to the secular culture. Benedictinism developed and grew as a reaction to this new type of church life by those who believed in and were committed to living the life of the original Apostolic Church. In turn Benedictinism was the principal influence in creating that which is distinctive in Catholic Christianity about Anglican spirituality, liturgy, and culture.

As you have heard me say so often, St Paul’s collapsed 40 years ago (after a half-century long period of ignored/denied decline) with the death of the principal financial underwriter one week before I became Rector at the age of 29. Many were the times I felt very depressed about the state of this parish while other suburban congregations seemed to be doing well (though in truth they also were undergoing an ignored/denied decline, just later than St Paul’s did). One of the things the succeeding 40 years have taught me is the graciousness of God’s Providence. This comparatively early collapse gave us both the motivation and the time – while it was still possible – to effect that paradigm shift from post-Constantinian to pre-Constantinian. Through the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit we are now clearly on the way where and becoming what we need to be in this new thoroughly secular world that only the most prescient would have dreamed of four decades ago. But even with that we are very much still a work in progress. We do, however, have and enthusiastically embrace the vision of that to which it seems clear God is calling us.

frTAF