



Just what is St Paul's relationship with "the Larger Church?"

One evening recently I had occasion to have telephone conversations with people in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and, closer to home, Milwaukee and Albuquerque. In none of the cases was it the purpose of the call, but in all three of the cases the subject came up of the on-going developments in the tragic devolution of the American Episcopal Church nationally. This raises again the question of what our own relationship with "the Larger Church" is and how these events affect us here at St Paul's.

As I have said so often, theology really is important to all of us; it is not just something of interest merely to those sorts of people who like that sort of thing. Here we see again the crucial importance of one's doctrine of the church.

In general the Protestant teaching about the institutional ("visible") Church is that the Church is a human sociological institution (like schools and universities, hospitals, libraries, etc.) whose basic function is Christian fellowship, inspiration, and education. In general in Protestantism the only operative salvific/theological element is the person's own "individual relationship with Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior." Therefore if one has a relationship with a church body it implies/proclaims/certifies that the person accepts that church body's teaching and practice, i.e. its fellowship, inspiration, and education.

The Catholic Doctrine of the Church (held by the Early Christian Church and continued unbroken to the present by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Old Catholics, and the Oriental Churches) is that the Catholic Church is a Sacrament, the foundational Sacrament that actually makes present the Kingdom of God and administers the seven Sacraments, the principal means by which God gives His people salvific grace.

This means that the "visible" (institutional) Church on Earth was established by Jesus Christ Himself to continue His Incarnation – to be His physical Body here authoritatively continuing His ministry – until He returns again at the end of the age (the Parousia). The Catholic Church is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and is a divine, not a human, institution. Anglicanism teaches, based on Our Lord's own teaching, that the Catholic Church while not infallible (it can err) is indefectible (it cannot remain in error; in the fullness of God's time, the Holy Spirit will lead it back into all truth). What, therefore, is indispensable about the Church ("the deal breaker") is not its immediate fellowship, inspiration, or education, but its sacramental validity.

Communio in sacris (being in "bottom line" sacramental relationship) in the Early Christian Church and in Anglicanism does not imply agreement in all things. It means – and only means – the recognition of a church body as a valid Sacrament and its validity as an authentic channel by which Christ conveys His grace through the seven Sacraments it administers (a clearly determinable, objective reality; it is Christ who "performs" the Sacraments; the church body merely "sets the stage" for Christ to act through the power of

the Holy Spirit). Where, therefore, Protestants often feel that basic honesty and integrity require that they end any relationship with a church body whose teaching and practice they disagree, Catholics can with integrity maintain a – limited and impaired to be sure – relationship with a church body whose current teaching and practice they disagree as long as that body is a valid Sacrament administering seven valid Sacraments, with the Dominical promise and sure knowledge that in the fullness of God's time that body will be led back into all truth.

While this sort of “bottom line” relationship is far from the full relationship that we always desire, for which we work and pray, and that Our Lord intends, it does allow Catholics to maintain fundamental communion in times of serious differences in significant matters (that is, not adding the sin of schism to the sin of heresy).

In the American Episcopal Church (with its Benedictine heritage of abbatial relationship with “the Larger Church”) it is the prerogative and responsibility of the Rector of the parish to ensure that the life and teaching of the community are authentically Catholic and that its celebration of the Sacraments is fully valid by any historic theological criterion. Before I was nominated by the Vestry and appointed by the Bishop as Rector I made the unequivocal and firm commitment to the parish lay leadership that that would always be the case at St Paul's during my rectorate. And it has been.

Our parish relationship with “the Larger Episcopal Church” is sacramental; and it always has been and continues to be fully valid sacramentally, which is all that is minimally required and necessary. Canon Law gives the Rector the authority to prevent any invalid sacramental acts within his geographic parish. And in the case of a question of the validity of a diocesan bishop, the Vestry (the Rector, Churchwardens, and Vestrymen, the legal corporation of the parish) may now request Delegated Episcopal Pastoral Oversight (“DEPO”) in which a bishop which the congregation can in conscience recognize as sacramentally valid is appointed to administer episcopal Sacraments (e.g. Holy Confirmation) in that parish.

On the other hand, St Paul's has and will continue to have its Christian “fellowship, inspiration, and education” with and from:

- Episcopalians whose life, teaching, and practice are consistent with world-wide historic Anglicanism
- Anglicans whose life, teaching, and practice are consistent with traditional Catholicism
- Catholics whose life, teaching, and practice are consistent with orthodox Christianity
- Christians whose life, teaching, and practice are consistent with Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

“And we are here to stay.”