

ANGLICAN USE CONFERENCE - 2008

Twenty-five years as a time frame takes a little perspective. As a young Anglican cleric I was serving in the Church of England as the assistant curate of St. Stephen's Southmead, Bristol. After having lived abroad for five years, we decided it was time to return to America. But where to go? I contacted Bishop Belden in Rhode Island, where we had lived before moving to England. He told me about a parish which he thought would be a good match for me. They were looking for a curate. The rector, he told me, was one of the great old priests of the diocese who, other than a brief curacy in another parish, had served his whole ministry in this one parish. I got the feeling that I was going to meet someone approaching the age of Methuselah, who had been rector since the age of the Great Flood! And when I met Fr. Olsen, indeed he did seem to be a fairly old man, and he had been at St. Barnabas for a very long time. It didn't dawn on me until he died a few years ago, that when I went to be his curate, Fr. Olsen was the very same age as I am now, and he had been at St. Barnabas for twenty-five years, the same amount of time I have been here.

It's amazing, isn't it, that when you're on the starting side of twenty-five years, it seems so long; but when that quarter of a

century has passed, it's flown by. And that's what we're marking this year: twenty-five years of the Anglican Usage in the Roman Rite, which started when Our Lady of the Atonement was established as a Catholic parish. But what took place twenty-five years ago didn't happen in a vacuum. We were fortunate here in San Antonio that the rescript arrived from the Holy See, allowing for my ordination, and the archbishop was ready to proceed immediately. But he didn't wake up one morning and think, "I guess I'll start an Anglican Use parish." No, there were many who had done yeoman work for many years before, preparing the way for the formal beginning of the work - people now departed, like Canon Albert Dubois and Fr. W.T. St. John Brown; people like Pope Paul VI and Cardinal Seper and Pope John Paul II. Others who were amongst those had this vision are still with us, some of whom are even here at this gathering, probably wondering as I am: "How did the time pass so quickly?" And, of course, we mustn't forget the interest and encouragement shown by a certain Cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger, now our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. It was during his time and under his authority as Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, that the Book of Divine Worship was approved. I'll speak more about that later.

So, looking back over this past quarter of a century, perhaps the first question is, "why?" Why did several of us make the journey into the Catholic Church? It would be nice if I could point only to the noblest motivations; that we were happily going along as Episcopalians, but then saw the truth and beauty of the Catholic Church, and through pure attraction, just had to make the journey. Maybe it was that way for a few, but for most of us it wasn't like that.

Obviously, I can't speak for everyone, but my own experience was probably generic enough. For me, the answer to the question, "why?" was because I knew I couldn't stay where I was. Now, I didn't like the idea of moving away from my ministry as an Episcopalian. In fact, where I was wasn't all that bad - '88 Prayer Book with Anglican Missal additions, very nice people with a fairly catholic understanding of the Faith -- but with the crisis of authority which was becoming more and more evident in the Episcopal Church, with decisions being made by General Convention which represented dramatic changes in doctrine and in the ministry of the church, it was evident that whatever claim to catholicity I thought there was, was quickly disappearing. So, for many of us, the initial thought of moving was for negative reasons - the need to escape from a disintegrating situation. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. Let's face

it: imperfect contrition can develop into perfect contrition, and sometimes it takes a kick in the backside to get us moving.

As long ago as the mid-1 970's it had become evident to me that with the crisis of authority in Anglicanism, there would be a gradual crumbling of what had been a venerable (although incomplete) expression of the Christian faith. Of course, the Church has always been free to change her discipline. But the idea of changing doctrine at the whim of a simple majority vote is antithetical to the will of Christ. When a very small majority of a very small part of the Anglican Communion could make a decision, for instance, about ordination - an issue which strikes at the very foundation of sacramental life, or when a justification for abortion and all sorts of other immoralities was able to be cobbled together, I realized that the Episcopal Church wasn't a safe place to be. For me, it wasn't just the issue of the ordination of women (as impossible as that is, in a Catholic understanding of Holy Orders), nor was it that some were able to wander off into a moral wasteland; rather, it was that the authority to make such decisions was claimed by whichever majority could push its agenda the hardest. "What next?" was all I could think. And indeed, we've seen what has come next - a series of decisions which makes many people

question whether the Episcopal Church is even a Christian denomination any more.

Of course, there are still many good people there, and I can't help but wonder how they're able to continue. When I see otherwise faithful people remaining where they are, while their religion falls apart around them, I can't help but think that maybe some of them have what might be called "The Vicar of Bray Syndrome." You know the story of the Vicar of Bray. There was a clergyman who managed to hold his position as parish priest in the village of Bray for more than fifty years, from the days of Charles II until the time of George I. He was perfectly comfortable becoming Catholic or protestant according to the religion of the reigning monarch. When he was reproached for his constant changing back and forth, his classic statement was, "Even if I changed my religion, I am sure I have kept true to my principle; and that is, to live and die as the vicar of Bray!" It's sad when holding a position becomes more important than holding the truth.

I think I can speak for most of us when I say that the reason for leaving the Episcopal Church was because each of us arrived at the point of saying "This far, and no further." That point may differ from person to person. It might be the matter of

women's ordination; it might be Prayer Book issues; it might be some aspect of moral teaching. There can be any number of "trigger issues," and some people seem to have a greater tolerance for those sorts of things. But I think all of these issues reduce down to one: the matter of authority. It became evident that there is but one place where we would find stable, trustworthy and godly authority, and that was in the Church which was undoubtedly founded by Christ, exercising the authority which He gave to St. Peter and his successors. So, the short answer to "why," is that we were looking for a home that didn't have a constantly shifting foundation. And what a joy it is to wake up every day knowing that what was true yesterday is still true today, and will be true tomorrow.

And thanks be to God, the Church to which we were led opened her arms with the approval of the Pastoral Provision. With that, there was no excuse to remain outside, and so personal, hard, practical decisions had to be made. And as I was faced with making this decision, I remember reading something from C. S. Lewis in his book Mere Christianity:

"We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be and if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. We have all seen this when

we do arithmetic. When I have started a sum the wrong way, the sooner I admit this and go back and start over again, the faster I shall get on. There is nothing progressive about being pigheaded and refusing to admit a mistake.”

Of course, it's hard to admit that we've got to turn and go in another direction. And that kind of decision most often involves some pretty heavy sacrifices. I know, for each one of us here who has made that decision, there were tough times. My story is only one of many, and it isn't any more remarkable than the stories many of you could tell.

For my family, it was on January 17th in 1982 that we arrived in San Antonio from Rhode Island . We had driven for almost five days, having left New England in the midst of a near-blizzard. I had taken our rather decrepit Volkswagen to a mechanic before we left, and when I asked him if we'd make it to Texas his reply was, "Hell, Mister, I don't think you'll make it out of town!" We did, though. We arrived with our (then) three very young children, our dog and a hamster, along with whatever supplies we could pack in around them.

On the day we left Rhode Island I was removed from the clerical ranks of the Episcopal diocese. I was officially deposed by the bishop. My salary had, of course, been terminated. We had lived in parish-owned housing, which we were required to leave

immediately. We had been stricken from all diocesan insurance policies, and even my small pension plan had been confiscated. As we approached San Antonio, I have to say, it didn't feel like much of a triumphal entry. Of course, God had a plan. It would have been nice at the time to have known what it was, but I suppose He wanted us to learn to walk in faith, which we did.

Looking back, those were some tough days. We had virtually no money. There were only a handful of people even interested in what we were doing. But as difficult as those times were, they were exciting, too. We were doing something worthy, something that hadn't been done before. Big challenges led to little victories, as we worked and waited for our entrance into the Catholic Church.

Every one of our parishes and communities in the Anglican Use has an interesting story. I know each one of us has experienced struggles and triumphs, and we each have inspiring stories of God's loving care for us. The things I'm sharing about our own experiences here will, I hope, strike a chord in those of you who have been through similar experiences, and even more importantly, I hope these stories will encourage those of you who are at the beginning of your journey within the Catholic

faith. Ours is a "common history," and we need to keep our stories alive for the sake of those who will come after us.

After the parish was canonically erected on 15th August 1983, I began to search for a permanent location for us to worship and to grow from the original eighteen people who made up the parish when we were established. We were, at that time, meeting at San Francesco di Paola Church, in downtown San Antonio. It's a beautiful little place, built by Italian immigrants, but the location wasn't very well-suited for us. Everyone had to travel quite a distance, and it was difficult to build up a communal life in a place which was fairly remote for all of us.

Subsequently we moved to a convent chapel on the north side of town, but of course, that was temporary, too. So I began to look for some land.

It seemed to me that the future growth of San Antonio would be taking place on the northwest side of the city. Everything pointed to it, and that's what has happened. Several years before, the archdiocese had purchased a small plot of land for the possibility that a territorial parish might be needed. When I inquired about locating our parish there, the answer was, "Yes, that would be fine. There's not much happening out there anyway, and we probably won't need it for a territorial parish."

The short-sightedness of that statement aside, it worked out well for us. To get the property, we were required to pay a rather hefty sum to the archdiocese, which eventually we did.

The first time I saw this land, I knew this was the spot. I had visited it before making the request. I had to crawl through the underbrush, literally on my belly, to make any kind of exploration. I had a small medal of Our Lady of the Atonement with me, and I buried it in the earth as I was making my slow progress through the woods and brush, claiming it for our Lady and her parish. Shortly after burying the medal, I came into a small clearing, allowing me to stand up. With the thick undergrowth surrounding me, I saw in the middle of the clearing a wooden cross stuck into the ground, and fastened to the rough cross was a small crucifix - and I took it as a sign from God. This was the place. This was where our Lord and His Blessed Mother wanted us to be. But I need to tell you why such a sign was necessary.

At the same time as I had requested the possibility of our getting the land, some Dominican priests had approached the archbishop about staffing a chaplaincy for the University of Texas , which is a short distance away. Even though we had asked first, the archbishop thought perhaps a better use for the land

would be to give it to the Dominicans. I told the archbishop, "You can't! I've already claimed it for Our Lady of the Atonement." He expressed his regret, but told me his mind was set. I warned him that we'd begin praying. And so we did.

For nine evenings we gathered to pray the Novena to the Holy Ghost. By the fourth evening, the archbishop contacted me. "I don't know what kind of prayer you've been saying," he said, "but the situation with the Dominicans has fallen through. You can build there." We finished the novena as an act of thanksgiving. We were intensely grateful to God, but not surprised at what He had done. Mind you, I have nothing against the Dominicans, but the Blessed Mother had other plans for the land.

I saved that little crucifix. We built a simple wooden shrine to Our Lady of the Atonement on the property where the crucifix had been found, and fastened it onto the peak of the shrine's roof. In time we made plans to celebrate a Mass there, and to break ground for the church.

Today there stands the newly-completed shrine, a copy of the original wooden one, but now in stone. Within the altar is the simple wood altar which stood there originally, now protected by

a permanent stone altar. And the little crucifix is there, incorporated into the shrine.

So it reminds us of our beginnings, and of how God guided and protected us as new converts to the Catholic faith. And God continues to do these sorts of things. He has in your own parishes, and He'll continue to do things like this in future parishes and communities of the Anglican Use. For those of you at the beginning of your adventure, take heart; for those of you who might wonder if you should begin a work like this in your own area, by all means, do. If God can do it here, He can do it anyplace.

Now, a look at these twenty-five years calls for a few words about the Book of Divine Worship. The initial request made to Rome included the desire for the Catholic ordination of Anglican clergy, which was granted. It included the request for some sort of parish structure to which the lay converts could belong, which was granted. And it included a request for elements of our Anglican liturgical heritage. And this, too, was granted. What form this would take was anybody's guess, at the beginning. There were some who wanted a restored Sarum rite. Some wanted one of the traditional Anglo-catholic Missals. Some wanted the 1928 Book of Common Prayer with a few Catholic

additions. There were others who thought that the most we could hope for would be a couple of traditional prayers thrown into the Mass of Paul VI.

In 1983 a special commission was established by the Sacred Congregation for Sacraments and Divine Worship, in conjunction with the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The task of the commission was to propose a liturgical book to be used by the parishes and congregations being established under the Pastoral Provision. I was privileged to serve on that commission. We met in Rome, in the Curial Offices looking out on St. Peter's Square. The membership of the commission was very much a "mixed bag." Archbishop (now Cardinal) Virgilio Noe served as chairman, and there were various liturgists and theologians taking part. It was evident from the beginning that not everyone had the same agenda. Some of us were working hard to include as much as possible; others wanted to include as little as possible. Some were willing to use the 1928 Prayer Book as the foundational document; others insisted that it had to be the 1979 Prayer Book. There were those who said that if something was not in an approved Episcopalian Prayer Book, then it shouldn't be included. This was of particular importance when it came to the Canon of the Mass - the Eucharistic Prayer. Using the 1928 Eucharistic Prayer was never in the cards;

however, the Gregorian Canon was included in various Anglo-catholic missals, and it was my request that we be allowed to use that traditional translation, or something close to it, rather than following the general consensus of the commission that we should simply use the ICEL translation. It was pretty sobering, and not a little frightening, to be the sole voice defending the inclusion of the Gregorian Canon in traditional English, and I was nearly hooted out of the conference room by the professional liturgists there - one of whom you may know from the news - Piero Marini, until recently the papal Master of Ceremonies. But I was given a chance to make the case, in which I had to speak before the whole commission, which turned out to be a successful attempt.

I know there are Anglo-catholics still in the Episcopal Church or in the Continuing Anglican Movement who look at the Book of Divine Worship, and find great fault with it. And their criticisms are, in some respects, quite legitimate. It isn't a perfect book. There are lots of things about it that I find dissatisfying. In some ways, it's incomplete. There is a jarring intrusion of ICEL language at the Offertory. It's entirely too much "1979 Prayer Book." But there'll be opportunities to improve it in the future, and the bottom line is this: it may not be as much as we wanted, but it's a whole

lot more than we expected. I think we sometimes forget just how astonishing it is, that the Catholic Church should add a whole new liturgy - not just the Mass, but also the Daily Offices, Baptism, Marriage, Burial of the Dead, and everything else which has been given to us. When we read of the recent debates by the Bishops' Conference about simple words like "ineffable" and "gibb et" - to think that we have a whole book full of that kind of language is quite astonishing! And it's our own living liturgy. There's no reason to think that it will necessarily remain frozen as it is, and as we see room for improvement, so I think there will be opportunities to develop it and refine it. But for now, I think it's quite magnificent, and it's nurturing a new generation of Catholics - a generation born and raised in the Anglican Use, a generation of Catholics who know no other kind of liturgical life.

Which brings me to an important point. And that is, the future of the parishes of the Anglican Use. We all know our numbers, for now, are small. After twenty-five years, we would be right in thinking that there should be more of us. And there would be, except for a few factors. One is that all but a few Anglican clergy have converted individually, and have not brought their people with them. Of course, not everyone can bring others with them, and very often it's because the local

Catholic bishop isn't open to having a parish of the Anglican Use in his diocese. And that brings us to an even more serious problem. It's difficult to convince Catholic bishops in many places that such a parish would be a great addition, rather than a financial drag. They're not accustomed to having such small parishes. When parishes of a couple of thousand families is normal, to establish a parish which begins with only forty or fifty people is simply beyond their experience. Of course, we know it can be done. As I said earlier, this parish began with only eighteen people, including the children.

What's the solution? In the short term, presenting our case more clearly to our bishops is important. Of course, we can't do that by ourselves. We need the Office of the Ecclesiastical Delegate to be willing to help educate the bishops about the Pastoral Provision and the Liturgy of the Anglican Use. The Pastoral Provision isn't just about getting more priests for the Church, as important as that is. It's also about restoring that unity for which Christ prayed. It's about "gathering up the fragments, that nothing be lost." For every Episcopal priest who enters the Catholic Church, there may be twenty-five or fifty or a hundred or more laity who could be brought into the Church.

At some point in the future there may well be the possibility of some sort of juridical structure which would facilitate the establishment of parishes. This possibility was recognized even in the original document which outlined the Pastoral Provision. When speaking of the structure of this Common Identity, the document states, "The preference expressed by the majority of the Episcopal Conference for the insertion of these reconciled Episcopalians into the diocesan structures under the jurisdiction of the local Ordinaries is recognized. Nevertheless, the possibility of some other type of structure as provided for by canonical dispositions, and as suited to the needs of the group, is not excluded."

But what about the parishes and communities we do have? It's important that we continue to make them as strong as possible. The decision we made here was to have as one of our major apostolates that of having a Catholic school - one of the most rewarding and yet demanding decisions we ever made. Fourteen years ago we began with Kindergarten through Third grade with only sixty-six students, and after adding grades over the years, we now offer a classical and Catholic education from Pre-Kindergarten all the way through High School, with a student body of almost five hundred. Not only does this institution impart a solid and excellent education, but it is also a tremendous evangelistic tool, as families who perhaps have been lukewarm are, through their children, returning to the practice

of their faith. And it has done more to spread the experience and knowledge of the Anglican Use liturgy than perhaps any other means. All the students and faculty attend Mass every single day, so even the youngest children are learning and experiencing our traditional prayers and devotional practices. Five hundred children praying the Prayer of Humble Access and singing the Healey Willan setting of the Mass every day is a pretty encouraging thing for the future of the Anglican Use!

I know there are great and inspiring things going on in all our parishes and communities. You all have stories of great faith, changed hearts, conversions and growth. But we need more parishes, which means we need willing bishops and a supportive structure within the Church to help that happen. We all know there are people scattered throughout the country who are looking for guidance and help in forming the nucleus of an Anglican Use community. We know from the Gospels that Christ isn't pleased when His sheep are left to scatter, and we know that He thinks it's pretty important to "gather up the fragments that nothing be lost."

Twenty-five years isn't a very long time in the big scheme of things. And if this can happen over the course of twenty-five years here, we know it can happen in many places. I take great

encouragement from this gathering here, and from what we're reading in the news even today. We've got a lot of praying to do for those Anglicans who are finally coming to realize that they can't stay where they are. So let's be an example to them of what it's like to come home to Rome.