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Respect and Growth – Inspirations from Anglicanism

With the current school year, I've been teaching for almost twenty-five years: first Religious Education, now English and Ethics. With few exceptions, I have always thoroughly enjoyed being a teacher, whether my students were children, teenagers or adults. As a priest, teaching has been a great gift to me and I am looking forward to many more years at school – because sharing young people's lives keeps you in touch with reality. It helps you to be aware of changes in language, mentality, social structures, such as the increasing impact of migration, or how traditional family structures are falling apart. I am grateful to my students, who have helped keep my feet firmly on the ground. So they have never been simply recipients, let alone objects for me. In fact, they have inspired me to treat them with respect, which every being of God's creation rightly deserves.

Due to the Latin origins of the word, respect means to see and appreciate the other person's face and being, a being that most evidently is always connected and in process. The 'other person' – as John Donne wrote in his Meditation XVII – is never an island nor is he (or she) unvarying, because he is set in a context which is continually changing. These are the conditions that any educational and any pastoral approach must bear in mind, because they provide the context in which our teaching and preaching takes place.

When we look at the way Thomas Cranmer composed the 1549 Prayer Book, we see that he is very sensitive to this fact. His aim was to establish a sound liturgical base for a whole country that for generations had been used to a certain kind of liturgy. At the same time, he wanted to make them adopt Protestant theology. He had to master two challenges: on the one hand, to respect tradition, and on the other, to inspire development and spiritual growth by introducing something radically new. Bartlett gives a lucid example to illustrate Cranmer's method in the Archbishop's new Collect for Purity¹. In his translation into English, Cranmer removes any sense that we might 'deserve' to love God. Instead, we simply pray 'that we may perfectly love thee' which is obviously proper Protestant theology, in that it denies that man can ever merit loving his creator of himself. But, as Bartlett comments, this 'also takes us into the heart of Cranmer's vision, which was that human beings would be enabled, by grace, to be in

¹ Bartlett, p. 183.

relationship of love with God'.² Another example of Cranmer's style and – as Weil puts it – 'of a distinctively Anglican character', is his Collect for Palm Sunday. He adds certain phrases to indicate that it was God's love which was the motivating energy behind the incarnation of Christ, and removes the petition that we might 'merit to be partakers of his resurrection.'³

So, being fully aware of the context in which he lived and worked, we can clearly see that Cranmer was not prepared to retain only what was traditional. Although he shows great respect towards theological and liturgical traditions, he does not deny his own understanding of the gospel and his belief that everything we are and do is the result of God's merciful love for us.

If we do not ignore, but rather face the context God has put us in, this may sometimes spur us to start a learning process. It is then not the context, the other people that we help to develop and grow. It is about the intellectual, spiritual, and personal growth happening within us.

Churches with a very close relationship to a certain nation may tend to ignore the outside world or even to develop an attitude of superiority. And it is no surprise that they feel increasingly uncomfortable when this outside world starts to have an impact on their shores. The conflict between Archbishop Gray of Cape Town and Bishop Colenso, when Gray attempted to depose him for heresy and Colenso appealed to the Privy Council, was merely one sign that the Church of England of the 19th century was in need of a new and convincing way to deal with other Anglican Churches around the world.⁴ Relationships between the center and the periphery had changed⁵, and it had become obvious that Anglicanism had spread and developed into a world-wide communion that needed more synodical instruments and a doctrinal focus that every church could agree on. Apart from adopting appropriate steps in favor of a more inclusive organization, the church needed to define basic doctrines to keep this organism of faith together. Given the current situation, it was natural that these essentials could not be defined unilaterally, lest relations would be endangered or eventually cut.

² Bartlett, p. 183.

³ Weil, p. 64.

⁴ Butler 41; Hincliff 401-2.

⁵ I take the terms 'center' and 'periphery' from Gustavo Gutierrez's understanding in his 'Theology of Liberation', most recently published in the 15th edition of 2012. Cf. Gutierrez, G./Müller, G.L. (2015): *On the Side of the Poor. The Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis.

So it made sense for at least the two major players to come together, first on the western side, than on the eastern side of the Atlantic. Not top-down, but in synodical debates and discussions, the General Convention meeting in Chicago in 1886, and the 1888 Lambeth Conference formed the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral with its four articles.⁶ Naming the essentials of a catholic and apostolic church, it highlights what is crucial in Christian belief and also how these ‘Tokens of Trust’ (Rowan Williams) are to be valued and ranked. In so doing, the Quadrilateral opposes an ecclesiology that puts every doctrinal factor on the same level and gives all ‘truths’ the same importance, ultimately defining faith in terms of countless rules and rubrics. The four articles also make clear that to be a member of the body of Christ is not just to believe and do what you are happy to do. So the Quadrilateral sets guidelines that can help to avoid both legalism and libertinism, forming a base that is modest and inclusive. Reminding Anglicans of Hooker’s ‘three-stranded cord’,⁷ According to the Quadrilateral, Christian faith builds on scripture, tradition and reason. Transferring this to the 21st Century, I’d say that to be a faithful member of the Catholic Church requires a sound knowledge of God’s word, an appreciation of God’s story with the faithful, and a fine discernment as to how to act today.

Spreading God’s good news of hope and reconciliation to the world, we are challenged by his call to be faithful to his gospel, and we are to be attentive to what God tries to tell us through the creation we are woven into, i.e. the world we are confronted with and that we are a part of. Mission is not a one-way process, it is not that clear who is the subject and who the object. So before we decide, speak and act, we have to listen – sometimes longer and more patiently than we would like to. An old priest and a good friend of mine once told me that it is no coincidence that God gave us two ears and only one mouth.

Sufficient listening and reflecting – not to forget praying – takes time. And the Church of England certainly took her time to consider whether it was reasonable and good to ordain female bishops. There were more than enough critics for whom all these intensive deliberations were nothing but a waste of time. They referred to ‘the signs of the time’, i.e. how society has already changed over the years and decades, and took this as a more than convincing sign that women should be able to become bishops in England, as well.

⁶ Butler p. 42; Bartlett p. 25.

⁷ Avis, P. (2014): *In Search of Authority. Anglican Theological Method from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, London/New York: Bloomsbury t&t Clark, pp. 106-118; cf. Bartlett, p. 50.

I think the Church was right to take her time. And I remember the sorrow and sadness of many when the vote in favor of female bishops failed so narrowly in November 2012. While there was sufficient support from the houses of bishops and clergy, only six more ‘yes’ votes in the house of laity would have been required.

On that day, the BBC reported that General Synod had voted ‘against’, but in my understanding the result was not a defeat. It was a sign that the Church needed more time to get more of her members on board to embark on a new phase. Ships don’t move only because someone, even if he is the captain, commands them to move. Ships go ahead when enough people want them to, take oars, set the sails, engage – together. And so in November 2012 it was clear, that – as some members of General Synod rightly commented – the Church needed ‘further effort to build a bigger consensus’.⁸ In more theological terms: the process of reception had not been completed, nor had the consensus fidelium reached a convincing level.⁹

There are denominations that act differently. Roman Catholic clergy find themselves in a position where they can veto or overrule whatever lay people have decided. Protestant systems suffer from presbyteries that can vote down any decision their pastors have made. The Anglican system makes clergy and laity search for consensus. That might demand greater efforts, but it takes account of the fact that, thanks to God’s grace, all of us as Christians are the Lord’s brothers or sisters. We have been seen and loved by him, and that is where our status comes from. This is why all of us are subjects, not objects, why we are called to live, learn and grow together, why we are to respect and love each other, and sometimes it is the least and weakest members who need the most respect and love (cf. 1 Cor 12.22-25).

Hawkins provides many telling examples of how this works out and why, at times, it doesn’t. I enjoyed reading his book very much and often found him in pastoral situations that were just too familiar to me, reminded me of parish life here in Germany – with its tragedies and comedies. But, coming back to the naval image, you only gain this experience if you leave your presumably safe vicarage/rectory, set sail, and expose yourself to real life where ‘waters may unpleasantly roar and foam’ (cf. Ps 46.3). Facing the context may lead to unexpected encounters, but this is the way God makes us learn and grow.

⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-20415689>.

⁹ Bartlett, pp. 154-5.

But how do we deal with that ‘we’? Jesus called his disciples to go out in pairs, to form groups where one can assist and support the other (Lk 10.1). Hawkins praises the concept of ‘Mutual ministry’ he learned from the Diocese of Western North Carolina in 1995.¹⁰ Those in charge of the program see themselves as living ‘in changing times that call us to re-envision the Church and to engage everyone (lay and ordained) in building its future.’¹¹ For about thirty years, Roman Catholics in Austria and Germany have been discussing the urgent need for parishes to evolve from being congregations that are cared for into caring congregations.¹² The reasons may differ, but in actual fact, a greater understanding and appreciation of a caring and mutual ministry takes us back to the ways of life the New Testament describes and recommends to Christians. Christians, however different they are, should not live side by side, sharing the pews, sitting next to each other, in a stronghold that may protect and safe them from the ‘world’. We are called to face each other, pay respect to everyone we become neighbors with, and strengthen each other’s life. Together we are invited to join God’s good and healing presence here among us, intrinsically woven into the world which is God’s beloved creation.

Bartlett, A. (2007): *A Passionate Balance. The Anglican Tradition*, New York: Orbis.

Hawkins, B. (2012): *Episcopal Etiquette & Ethics. Living the Craft of Priesthood in the Episcopal Church*, Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing.

Sykes, S. et al. (1999, 2nd. ed.): *The Study of Anglicanism*, London: SPCK.

- Weil, L.: *The Gospel in Anglicanism*, in: Sykes, pp. 55-83

- Hincliff, P.: *Church-State Relations*, in: Sykes, pp. 392-405

- Butler, P.: *From the Early Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, pp. 30-51

¹⁰ Hawkins, p. 15.

¹¹ <http://www.diocesewnc.org/Clergy%20Resources/mutual-ministry-review.html>.

¹² E.g. Zulehner, P.M. (1983): *Priestermangel praktisch: Von der versorgten zur sorgenden Gemeinde*. Munich: Kösel.