

The Gospel and the Catholic Church

a conference discussing Anglican patrimony today (St Stephen's House, Oxford. 25/26 April 2018)

The idea for this conference first emerged in 2016, the eightieth anniversary of the first publication of Michael Ramsey's *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*. 2016 was also the year of the death of John Webster, a great theologian of the Anglican evangelical tradition, while the eventual year of the conference, 2018, will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Austin Farrer. This triple commemoration should keep us focused on the breadth of the Anglican inheritance.

When Pope Paul VI spoke respectfully of "Anglican patrimony" at the canonisation of the English martyrs he referred specifically to the liturgical and spiritual patrimony of the Anglican Church. Since then the term has acquired a wider significance with Pope Benedict XVI's establishment of the Ordinariate for those wishing to preserve some aspects of their Anglican inheritance within the full communion of the (Roman) Catholic Church. This latest initiative has raised in a new way the question of those aspects of Anglican patrimony that can enrich the Catholic Church.

It is hardly a secret that the identity of Anglicanism and its potential contribution within the universal church are currently matters of some debate! This is of course nothing new but follows directly from the history of the Church of England through and since the Reformation. In a letter written in 1547, Bishop Stephen Gardiner wrote of an episcopal publication that, "*It resembled a common storehouse, where every man laid up in store such ware as he like, and could tell where to find to serve his purpose.*" Ever since the separation of the Church of England from Rome, different and often contradictory voices have laid claim to what they describe as the "authentic" Anglican tradition. Its adherents often identify with a spiritual tradition whose natural home may be Rome, Wittenberg or Geneva, and it is sometimes claimed that the strength and vitality of the Church of England lies in its these distinctive strands of churchmanship rather than in the church as a whole. Others assert however that it is precisely in the way in which these strands coexist that the essence of Anglicanism is to be found. But this itself raises further questions: does "comprehensiveness" mean a mutual tolerance between these strands (critics might call them "tribes") based on little real contact, or does it reflect an underlying theory or polity that somehow reconciles positions which other ecclesial communities would not tolerate?

Does comprehensiveness mean something Catholic or does it stand for chaos and incoherence? Does the idea of the Via Media still have any value? And of course many both within and without the Anglican world have doubted whether it ever did. The growth and increasing diversity of the Anglican Communion have brought new challenges, testing Anglican unity to and beyond breaking point. The "Anglican continuum" in its various forms (including its more ecclesial manifestations in the Free Church of England, the Anglican Church in North America and the Ordinariate) are witness to a living inheritance.

Despite the muddles of its history, the Anglican tradition has enabled generations of faithful men and women to learn the Scriptures and the Catholic Creeds, has nourished them by the sacraments and empowered them for personal holiness, social engagement and missionary witness. Perhaps it is because of these muddles that Anglicans have always been searching for unity both among themselves and in the wider Church of which (and this is surely one thing on which all Anglicans will

agree!) the Church of England is “a part”. This may explain why Anglicans have played such a significant part in the modern ecumenical movement.

In words that have become famous, Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher once said, *“We have no doctrine of our own—we only possess the Catholic doctrine of the Catholic Church enshrined in the Catholic creeds, and those creeds we hold without addition or diminution.”* Admittedly, he rather spoils the force of that claim by claiming that Anglicanism *“represents the Christian faith in a purer form than can be found in any other Church in Christendom.”* The Archbishop used even that claim however as *“a reminder to us of the immense treasure that is committed to our charge — the immense responsibility on us in these days to maintain unshaken those common traditions that we have inherited from those who have gone before us.”ⁱ*

The Archbishop has been criticised on the grounds that the particular way and proportion with which Anglicanism holds those “common traditions” is distinctive, that is to say in other words that it is part of the patrimony. If that be so, it is important to understand why, and to ask whether it may be one of the contributions the Anglican tradition may make to the universal Church. Part of the importance of this is that apart from the narrowest of confessional communities all mainstream churches share something of the diversity of Anglicanism, whether they admit it or not. The Church of England may indeed resemble the “common storehouse” of which Stephen Gardiner wrote, but many other churches are closer to that than they like to acknowledge.

In the book from which this conference takes its title, Michael Ramsey wrote that, *“the greater vindication of [the Anglican Church] lies in its pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and the travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as “the best type of Christianity,” but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died.”*

As Stephen Sykes pointed out in *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (p.3), *“precisely as a sign it must possess sufficient coherent identity to be recognisable as such ...[I]ncompleteness is something other than incoherence.”*

Our aim in this conference is to explore various aspects of this identity.

One commentator has identified a fourfold patrimony of Anglicanism:

“The synodal character of Anglican governance, in corporate and conciliar system of decision-making and authority

Its distinctive spiritual tradition, closely linked to pastoral practice, including the re-establishment of the religious life and not excluding the valuable gifts of evangelical and reformed piety

Its theological traditions, especially the Caroline Divines and the Tractarian movement, but not neglecting the contribution of Evangelical and “Broad Church” thinkers who have also shaped Anglican identity as it searches for unity

Its liturgical musical tradition of worship in English over many centuries.”ⁱⁱ

Of course others might offer a different classification. The unofficial ecumenical group behind this conference are convinced of the continuing contribution the God-given Anglican patrimony can still make to the full visible unity of the *Una Sancta*.

ⁱ 30th January 1961. Speech in Central Hall Westminster on his return from Australia and New Zealand, reported in the Church Times 2nd February 1961

ⁱⁱ Mark Woodruff, Foreword to *Anglicans and Catholics in Communion* (Catholic League 2010)