

Catholic Anglicanism for Evangelicals¹

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Perhaps like me you have enjoyed watching *Call the Midwife* on ABC TV over recent years. It portrays a bygone world of Anglican nuns and their secular nursing colleagues who live and pray together, and who work as midwives, in the crowded and impoverished slums and docklands of Poplar, in East London. A century of such mission in the hands of the so called Anglo-Catholic slum priests and religious sisterhoods represented a vision of the world, the Eucharist and the common good held together by the incarnate love of God.

I feel an affinity with this program because the late Canon James Warner, under whom I trained at Brisbane's then quite Anglo Catholic St Francis' Theological College, in the mid-1980s, was a young curate in Poplar around my birth year, 1960, when the fourth season of *Call the Midwife* is set. Whereas the local curate is referred to as "Mr" in the program, the clergy would of course have been called "Father", going about their pastoral visiting in the streets and alleyways in cassocks and even birettas. They would have been known and loved by very many ordinary people young and old, not just the churchgoers. Sunday mass at All Saints', Poplar, would have been dignified, beautiful, musical, highly ritualistic, yet evangelistic, too, and quite enjoyable—not at all stuffy. The sacraments were the centre of a vibrant pastoral program in such parishes: with boys' clubs, girls' societies, missions to seamen, scouts and guides, good works of all sorts, and the Church's high festivals celebrated in ways that reached out to the wider community. Anglo-Catholic parishes, like Holy Trinity, Fortitude Valley, in Brisbane, where I served my curacy, sought to present an integral imaginative vision of the Christian life. It was a vision of collaborative discipleship centred on the Eucharist and the Church year, celebrating the joy of Christ who stands at the heart of nature and its beauty, of a beloved humanity and its struggle, of human reason and aspiration, and of society at large, which cannot help but be transformed as heaven presses near to earth.

This was the Catholic vision of my own Anglican formation for the priesthood. Without some of the more catholic trappings in liturgy, nevertheless aspects of this Catholic imagination are not completely foreign to more central Anglicanism. These aspects might involve emphasising the importance of regular traditional worship, of disciplined daily

spiritual habits, of the Church in mediating God's grace, of parish fellowship as a corrective to lonely individualism, and even of a little incarnate mystery in the liturgy as a corrective to today's widespread discarnate rationalism.

I for one do not wish to perpetuate the old party model of Catholic Anglicanism in opposition to Evangelical Anglicanism—the former, when truest to itself, has always been missional and evangelistic. However, there are differences in theological emphasis, and in how both Church and mission are conceived. In what follows I want to highlight distinctively Catholic emphases under the headings of Vision, Eucharist and Church.

Vision

Our word 'Catholic' comes from the Greek words *kata holos*: according to the whole. It is a holistic vision of God's unstinting embrace of a much-loved world, and of a deeply beloved though admittedly wayward human species. There is generosity in the Catholic vision of humanity, though not naivety: we humans are restless for God, and yet easily diverted—even perverted. So sin, yes, but total depravity, no. And grace, too, of course—though not grace conceived narrowly. Catholic grace is more free range. It surfaces in our natural inclinations towards relationship, wisdom and co-creation, just as it connects us to God whenever we find ourselves extended beyond ourselves in every impulse to love and in every worthy self-sacrifice. If the Catholic imagination is right, then creation, incarnation and redemption are making their presence felt.

There has always been a Catholic movement in Anglicanism, long before the early nineteenth-century Tractarians and their Anglo-Catholic descendants. The marks of it have included an openness to human reason in the light of God's word, a delight in creation with eyes sharpened by the promise of God's new creation, and in particular a sense of continuity with the early undivided Church. The ancient Fathers and Creeds were claimed as a crucial part of Anglican patrimony by the Tractarians (i.e. locating Anglican origins well before the Protestant Reformation), just as the later Anglo-Catholics looked to medieval and post-Tridentine Catholic expressions for resources to express their burgeoning catholic sensibility. This is where the Eucharistic vestments and the catholic ritual came in, to transform worship in depressed places like Poplar with colour, beauty and vibrancy. These trappings have now become mainstream within wider Anglicanism (though outside of Anglo-Catholicism they are not typically viewed as bearing ideological significance).

It was Catholic-minded Anglicans who took up modern currents of thought such as historical criticism and evolutionary biology. These so-called Liberal Catholics came to see that the truths of revelation needed to be interpreted in dialogue with new discoveries, perspectives and aspirations of the modern world. Theology is understood in Catholic Anglicanism as the handmaid of faith and the companion of practice—as faith seeking understanding, and practice articulating its underlying motives. So, behind the wide sympathies and extensive gathering of resources by Anglo-Catholics, a guiding passion was at work. Theirs was not simply an odd mix of intellectual novelty and antiquarian bricolage. Rather, it was a vision as wide as creation, as sympathetic as incarnation, as no holds barred as crucifixion, as path breaking as resurrection, as joyful as Pentecost, and as hopeful as the seer's vision of a new Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22).

This breadth of vision included a comprehensive celebration of the saints, both living and dead. And this involved prayer for the dead, especially in the traumatic aftermath of World War I, including the erection of shrines and Calvaries outside churches such as had not been seen in England since the Reformation. These developments gave Anglo-Catholicism significant pastoral traction and fuelled its increasing prominence, up to a peak in the 1930s. Prayers and masses for the dead, while a departure from established Anglican principle, proved to be a blessing for the community and powerfully evangelistic.

So here is a Catholic vision sharing the zeal of Evangelicalism but differently expressed. It acknowledges sin, yes, though without the potentially vertigo-inducing demands of Calvinist theological anthropology. It insists on humanity coming to dwell at peace with God through Jesus Christ, but it is our human hearts that change, not God's. It regards the incarnate life and bodily resurrection of Jesus as framing and situating the message of his cross, making salvation a warm-blooded process of inclusion rather than a forensic transaction or imputation. It acknowledges the active conscious participation of Christian disciples in God's grace, though it regards grace as ecclesial and prophetic before it is individual and moral. And it is so firmly anchored in the Word that it eagerly welcomes the lavish overflow of that Word into the concrete grace of the sacraments.

Eucharist

The Catholic imagination is essentially sacramental, in the sense that Christ is triumphantly gathering-up all creation and human life in the sweep of his resurrection. This is made most

concrete in the sacrament that is Christ's body. But which body is that? Up to the early-medieval period, a threefold body of Christ was perceived by Christians. There was the Lord himself, with his body on earth now risen to heaven; there was his body the Church, and there was his body really present in the sacrament of the altar. Later developments, from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, emphasised Christ's real presence on the altar at the expense of Jesus himself and his teachings in the Gospels, and at the expense of his gathered people comprising Christ's body, the Church. A subsequent loss of Gospel focus and of lay discipleship helped drive the Protestant Reformation as a corrective. In response, a triumphalist Roman Catholicism arose for which the Church's sacramental monopoly enforced its institutional power. Nowadays, post Vatican II, the mass is back in tune with the word and understood fully in the context of Christ's body gathered, which is where it belongs.

An evangelical student asked me recently why it is not enough for Catholic Anglicans to rejoice in God's promises through the word, rather than insisting on so prominent place for the Lord's Supper, beyond simple obedience and devout remembrance. This is a good question. My answer will not appeal to those who favour a non-sensual rationalistic minimalism in religion, and who expect fully articulate and zealous engagement from all worshippers. My answer is that *the Word becomes flesh, and we dishonour the incarnation by turning that flesh back into word*. Instead, we view that flesh as inseparable from God's saving word in scripture, and so we regard Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist as the pledge and overflow of God's word.

It may help to view the Eucharist as the fullness of God's answer to the Lord's Prayer of his Son. First, it is Jesus' own prayer, but he gives it to his disciples so that, using it regularly, they can be caught up in Jesus' own self-offering to the Father—and so too in every Eucharist. Second, the Lord's Prayer is about the hallowing of God, before it has anything to say about us and our needs—and so too in every Eucharist, as we do well to remember whenever we are tempted to conform Sunday worship to today's culture of what Philip Rieff calls 'therapeutic individualism'. Third, our needs are then acknowledged—and so too in every Eucharist, where our prayer for bread is 'overaccepted' by God, who gives us the Bread of Heaven. Fourth, the Lord's Prayer declares the centrality of relationship and forgiveness in God's purposes for the Church—and so too in every Eucharist, as sinners confess, find forgiveness, and ritually enact God's peace. Finally, all this is declared to be

real and concrete in the Lord's Prayer, as God's future is proclaimed as really present: "the Kingdom, the power and the glory", which are ours "now and forever"—and so too in the Eucharist, which is the *now* that, albeit incompletely and imperfectly, makes present the *not yet* of God's promised future.

Ultimately, Catholic Anglicanism approaches Christ's presence in the Eucharist with a confident realism because of God's promises that we receive at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Whether it be Richard Hooker's confidence that Christ is truly received in the Eucharist, tempering both Tridentine and Puritan emphases, or a fully-fledged Anglo-Catholic belief in the real presence with genuflection, tabernacles and even Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, what we see is a confidence based on God's promises. Christ is not confined in heaven, or in the past, but is vibrantly alive among his people in the midst of his world.

Hence the priest's language at the altar does not just declare facts about God's intentions or about Jesus' past, nor are his or her words simply for the evoking of memories and devotional feelings. Rather, the Eucharistic words create a state of affairs. Using the linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin's terms, they are not just *locutionary*, or fact-stating, and they are not just *illocutionary*, or evocative of new connections. They are also *perlocutionary*, which means that they bring into effect what they state. If such confidence in the real presence seems too Catholic, its groundedness in the word and in the confidence of faith reveals what I like to think is an Evangelical impulse.

Church

It is not for nothing that Catholic Anglicanism has been referred to as high Church. That term has old-fashioned Tory Royalist echoes that are out of tune with some Anglo-Catholic developments, not least in radically leftist versions of Christian Socialism. But, in general, being Catholic does entail an elevated role for the Church as a vehicle of grace. Hence, our Church is the mother of us Christians, and not an organization that we form. It is hardware, not software. Church is not an app that we use, to assist us as we make our essentially private arrangements with God. Nor does being Catholic entail a static ontology, dispensing divine mercy in measured doses via an ecclesiastical bureaucracy, as has sometimes sadly been the case. Rather, it is about God's new creation discretely but dynamically extending

itself through history. High Church means high confidence that Jesus' high priestly prayer (John 17) has actually been answered.

The Church as *mater et magister*, mother and teacher, is also a prophetic sign among the other institutions and powers of this world. This is seen in the Church's being, its saints, its actions, and not just in its words. The world needs to see a community so liberated by God's love that it does not need to play by the usual self-justifying rules. As American Catholic theologian John Cavadini put it, "it is only a community that is not formed on the basis of claims of human purity, achievement, or excellence, however unique, that can mediate perspective simply by its very presence in the world, on those that are".²

So an imperfect Church, not obsessed with its own ideological and moral purity, but confident instead in Christ's mercy and forgiveness, gives rise to an attractive Catholic humanism—one that is convinced but not closed-minded, open-hearted and curious rather than peevish and narrow, and merciful rather than either lax or harsh—that is, a Christian humanism that avoids certain besetting tendencies of both Christian liberals and conservatives.

An important aspect of the Church according to the Catholic imagination is its pastoral structure. The Church is integrated into every community, while embedded also in wider geographical, social and cultural commonalities through its basic unit the diocese. The pastoral structure of parishes centred on the church building and the Eucharist is a pointer to a heavenly embrace of earth, through the everyday pastoral ministry of service, nurture, teaching, community building and making disciples.

However, the parish in reality is not always the parish in theory, as all clergy discover. This has implications for our witness and mission. In mid-twentieth century France, the Catholic Church recovered a remarkable zeal for mission. In the so-called Mission to France, they favoured young Christian worker groups, which were led by lay people trained and supported by worker priests who lived among the urban proletariat and came to share their struggles. In these circles, parishes were sometimes seen as a problem that had to be circumvented. Typical congregations proved themselves unwilling and unable to receive and nurture new converts—they were too bourgeois, tame and respectable to accommodate the lively, worldly, sometimes rough and uncouth young workers who started to show up. Other French Catholics of the day, such as l'Abbé Michonneau, in his post-war book *Revolution in a City Parish*, recognised that the parish is in fact the one concrete element in

the evangelising task.³ Still, he acknowledged that there was quite a mission of parish renewal required. Regarding many typical parishioners of his day, Michonneau's conclusions reach across oceans and decades to strike us with undiminished relevance: "They have not had to find the pearl of great price for themselves, and so, they do not feel impelled to call others to rejoice with them. They cannot quite imagine themselves as apostles".

We must acknowledge, without being scandalised or unduly frustrated, this disjunction between theory and practice, and that many parishes offering elements of Catholic Anglicanism need help to appreciate and unlock all the good gifts that I am describing. Religious education, catechumenal programs, better liturgy and music, enhanced ministries of welcome to children and families, and the never ending task of preaching and teaching and pastoring so that all these elements begin to gel, are all indispensable. Let there be no mistake about that. Yet without an intentional commitment to more Anglicans growing in the seriousness of their discipleship, then the Catholic vision that we put out there on Sundays, despite its considerable attractiveness, will only be folded up and put away again, with little ongoing impact.

Yet we cannot wait for everything to be right in the Church and the congregation before we undertake mission and evangelism, nor need we. The good news is that our actual doing of mission can also unlock the riches of faith for people, even if they are not thoroughly formed as disciples or fully equipped for this or that lay ministry. Indeed, the Catholic whole-of-life approach provides many opportunities for more nominal believers to get a taste of God at work through being involved in mission, without having to be too explicitly evangelistic, so that they are surprised and even converted by that experience.

The big challenge for many of our parishioners is to be able to talk about Jesus, which if it is authentic does not of course need to be polished and word perfect—as clergy unfailingly discover when they try to do it with the the curious and open minded, let alone the sceptical and indifferent. But the good news, on which Catholic faith is based, is that God is at work, creating and redeeming through Jesus Christ and enlisting us in this enterprise, through the Holy Spirit, out of love for the World. The good news is that we do not have to do it ourselves, as if God just sits back watching us scramble about. In this sense our Church's mission is rather like that of the midwife, playing a significant but nevertheless subordinate role in the birthing of God's future.

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¹ This article is the slightly-expanded version of an address given to Canberra clergy at a 2016 consultation on 'Catholic Evangelism'.

² John Cavadini, Review of *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church* by George Weigel. Online at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/08/church-as-sacrament> (accessed October 2016).

³ Georges Michonneau, *Revolution in a City Parish*. Westminster, Newman Press; Oxford, Blackfriars, 1950.