

**Sunday, October 25, 2009**  
**The Very Reverend Douglas A. Stoute**

On Tuesday, Pope Benedict issued an Apostolic Convention allowing Anglicans to join the Roman Church while maintaining their own liturgy and Prayer Book. Significantly, Anglican clergy could be re-ordained as Roman priests. The celibacy requirement would be waived.

The media has responded vigorously, particularly in the United Kingdom.

Opinions vary: it has been viewed as either a generous pastoral invitation or a big inter-church poaching scheme. Some see it as a nice accommodation towards estranged Anglicans. Others see it as a predatory move that will deeply divide worldwide Christendom at a time when we need to be working closer and focusing more directly on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is rarely mentioned is the most sinister aspect of this. It is in effect an appeal to disaffected Anglicans who have left or are considering leaving the Anglican Communion because of their views on women and gays. It is the opposition that these Anglicans have to the ordination of women and the blessings of same-sex unions that the Roman Church is seeking to capitalize on. A headline this week in the National Catholic Reporter summed it up: “MYSOGYNIST? HOMOPHOBIC? WE’VE GOT THE CHURCH FOR YOU!”

This is not new. The Church hierarchy in both the Roman and Anglican Churches is replete with examples of massive errors in judgment.

The matter of the Convention has been smouldering for over a decade. It was engaged fully two years ago, when Australian Archbishop John Hepworth, the leader of the Traditional Anglican Communion, a breakaway group that claims to represent up to 400,000 laity worldwide began leading this initiative. Interestingly, he is himself a former Roman Catholic priest, now divorced and remarried with three children. Despite the fact that, even under the new regime he would unlikely be ordained in the Roman Church, he is warmly received in Rome by the Vatican.

In England, negotiations with the Vatican were conducted by two right wing Anglican bishops. These bishops had been sanctioned by Archbishop Rowan Williams to provide “pastoral care” for Anglicans who did not want to worship with woman priests. They are: the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, Andrew Burnam and Bishop of Richborough, Kevin Newton.

Both of these men visited Rome this year at Easter to have talks with Cardinal Levada, the prefect of the Congregation of the Faith. This is the new name for the old Inquisition.

Shortly after this meeting, these so called “Flying Bishops” appealed again to Rome for help because the Church of England had now decided to consecrate woman Bishops. It is difficult to imagine that England does not have a single female Bishop. The vote of the

Synod to allow women to be consecrated Bishops sent the Flying Bishops back to Rome for help.

It is important to note that there was opposition to this from liberals within the Roman Church. Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, who at the time was the Archbishop of Westminster, warned against this initiative. He said that traditional Anglicans were in fact "more Roman than the Romans." He also appreciated the inherent insult to Anglicans and the Church of England in particular.

Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor retired in May. The reactionaries took the opportunity to move forward.

The role of the Church of England in all of this is problematic as well. It responded to people who did not want to worship with women priests by appointing right wing Bishops to give them "pastoral care." This was a bizarre response. It is incomprehensible that a core of bigotry was catered to in this fashion. Education, prayerful consideration and the involvement of women might have been a more appropriate response. In any event, the move enabled the core of bigotry to exist. Not surprisingly, these same two bishops are also the ones now negotiating with Rome. Archbishop Rowan Williams who acceded to their request to provide this so called pastoral care, was not even told about their negotiations with Rome. That is how faithful they are to the Church of England. Archbishop Williams said this on Wednesday to his clergy and bishops:

*I am sorry that there was no opportunity to alert you earlier to this: I was informed of the planned announcement at a very late stage and we await the text of the Apostolic Constitution itself and its Code of Practice in the coming weeks.*

This is a sad state of affairs.

It comes at a difficult time for the Anglican Communion worldwide. Torn apart by internal division and attacked by the evangelical wing it would have been helpful not to be broadsided by Rome from the other. It would have been better to have spoken of ways to develop our common faith rather than seek to divide.

It also cannot but harm the Roman Church. Two classes of priests would be created. Surely, the principles of celibacy would have to be revisited. The disaffected Anglicans would be predominately those opposed to women and gays which would run contrary to the views of most Catholics in the west.

There is such an overlap in the faith, doctrine and spirituality between the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. This overlap is well captured in the joint statement of Archbishop Rowan Williams and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster:

*The Apostolic Constitution is further recognition of the substantial overlap in faith, doctrine and spirituality between the Catholic Church and the Anglican tradition. Without the dialogues of the past forty years, this recognition would not have been possible, nor would hopes for full visible unity have been nurtured. In*

*this sense, this Apostolic Constitution is one consequence of ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.*

We must not let the human judgemental errors sabotage our faith, or our belief in the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to return to the Gospel of Jesus Christ who despised unbridled religious hierarchy and was not afraid to speak against bigotry and injustice.

In today's Gospel, Bartimaeus asked Jesus for help. Jesus said, "What do you want?" He replied, "I just want to be able to see." Jesus said, "Your faith has made you whole." In all humility that's what we as a church must be doing - just asking Jesus to help us to see; to see the heart of the Gospel, the heart of Jesus Christ, and let the other things fall away. That faith will make us whole.

Let us remember that it is our faith in Jesus Christ that makes us whole, not institutions that humans create and that we often get wrong. I am not saying for a moment that the church is just another institution, like the Lion's Club or the Rotary Club – good as these things are. We believe profoundly that the church is rooted in the blood of Jesus Christ. It is spread by the witness of the apostles, by the martyrs and by faithful Christians throughout the centuries. We believe in the words of scripture that on the Rock of Christ the church will be built – "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." I am saying here that despite the events of the last week we must keep matters in perspective. These things will not have a significant effect on the Anglican Communion, certainly not on the Church of Canada. We remember that the Church of Christ is indestructible. Theologians speak of this as the indefectibility of the church.

But we also recognize that whenever human beings get their hands on anything, we have a perverse way of corrupting and corroding them. We can call this the "human stain." The good news is that this is not the last word. Bigotry does not have a lasting shelf-life. The Church in the fullness of time will be embraced and transformed by Christ until it is presented to God spotless. Bigotry will not be the last word, but in this period of transition, may God give us the strength to recognize injustice wherever it happens to be, to speak against it and to work against it, for there is no place for that stain in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.