

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

No. 8

“IS THIS A CATHOLIC CHURCH?”



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One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church,
worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
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which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh
in each generation.’*

IS THIS A CATHOLIC CHURCH?

Sometimes people ask “Is this a Catholic Church”. Well, yes and no: it depends on what you mean by Catholic. St. Andrews is not a Roman Catholic Church but, since it was established in 1863, has stood within the Catholic tradition of the Church of England and Anglicanism. So, what does it mean that we are an Anglo-Catholic parish? Some people consider the ‘dear old C of E’ to be a Protestant Church and wonder how all this business of Catholicism ‘crept’ into the Church. And, finally, does it all matter? So I will attempt, in three articles, to give *very* simplified – and therefore inadequate – answers to these complex issues:

- 1. The essence of Catholicism in the Anglican tradition.**
 - 2. The historical roots of Anglo-Catholicism.**
 - 3. Catholicism and its place in the life of the Church.**
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1. The essence of Catholicism in the Anglican tradition.

Introduction

Every time we recite the Creed at Mass we affirm a series of statements that were agreed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD. It was the final agreed statement that defined what Christians believe and, as such, was to be accepted throughout the Christian world. Hence it contains the statement that we believe in “one, holy catholic and apostolic church”: it doesn’t mean we are Roman Catholic but that we hold that same, universal, faith. The Council repudiated the beliefs of certain other Christian traditions of the time (heterodox) and instituted what was to be the ‘orthodox’ (right thinking) faith.



Edward P. Ross

The OED defines the word ‘catholic’ as “*Universal; of interest or use to all men (sic); all-embracing, of wide sympathies, broadminded, tolerant*”. The root of this universal faith lies in the Incarnation of God in Christ. That had always been a cause of contention. Who was Jesus? God? Man? Human and divine – how? And so the Catholic Creeds were forged.

The nature of the Church of England is also Catholic. At the Induction of every priest the following is asserted:

'The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of the Bishops, Priests and Deacons. We affirm our loyalty to this inheritance of faith as our inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making Him known to those in our generation'

The Church of England did not come into existence at the Reformation in the 16th century: the Reformation was just that – a reform of the existing Church. The present Archbishop of Canterbury, therefore, is styled as the 103rd since St. Augustine. No new church was 'created': there was a breach with Rome but the Church in England continued.

Catholicism, then, is rooted in the tradition of the Church of this land. Its essence is to be found in our understanding of the nature of God's revelation through Christ as the essence of faith, seeking to maintain a balance between the resurrection and the incarnation and seeing that in the context of God's continuing creation. Because Catholic means universal, Catholic Christianity cannot be privatised. God made us social beings to care for each other. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God himself is a kind of community - three persons existing in perfect union - and we are made in his image. We can only develop into the people he wants us to be through our relationships with him and with one another.

The doctrines of the Creation and Incarnation also stress God's involvement in the whole of life, material as well as spiritual. Our calling as Catholic Christians is the sanctification not only of ourselves but of the created world we live in. Salvation does not remove us from the world and promise only 'pie in the sky when we die'. We must start building the Kingdom here and now, and resist the attempt to make morality a purely personal and individual concern. Catholic morality is as much a social, political and environmental matter as a personal one.

Some of the most famous Anglo-Catholics were priests who worked in slums which no other Christian influence touched, and who combined their personal ministry and evangelism with political action for justice. In our own time there is hardly less division and injustice in our society and our world. In addition there are many new and pressing concerns about discrimination, violence and social disintegration, economic oppression, genetics, medical ethics and global threats to the environment.

Although Catholicism is inclusive - for everybody - particular versions of Catholicism have not always proved to be so in practice. Yet, by definition Catholics are committed to inclusive models of Christian life and to work against injustices and prejudices - some of which the Church itself has helped to generate down the ages. The most powerful way of proclaiming the Gospel will always be by behaviour, not by slogans or definitions, and our vocation is to reflect in our personal lives and in our movement the God who is himself inclusive, because he welcomes us first - and then loves us into what he would have us be.

Our respect for tradition and discipline - and our awareness of the reality of human sinfulness - are therefore matched by tolerance and welcome at the pastoral level. At the heart of Catholicism is the conscience of the individual, as expressed in the Anglican tradition by Queen Elizabeth I's disinclination to "open windows on men's souls". Nevertheless, Catholic teaching has always emphasized that the primacy of conscience is not an indulgence, since the individual has an urgent responsibility to inform the conscience by prayerful reflection on experience, scripture and tradition- weighing each in the light of the others. In our own day the Church faces a number of acute moral dilemmas, not least on issues surrounding gender, sexuality and the family, which remain unresolved. While rooted and grounded in the tradition of the Church, Anglican Catholics remember those words quoted above: *(The Church of England) professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation*'. We are called to remain open in heart and mind, and claim the freedom - a genuine liberalism - to relate that tradition to the present, and in doing so to play our part in the evolution of that tradition itself. Anglican Catholicism is, therefore, able to draw on the past but not be enslaved to it; open to the movement of the Spirit in each generation and culture. Truly Catholic yet rightly protesting the need to be open to the Spirit.

Anglican Catholicism exists to remind the Church that "the acid test of a truly Catholic Christianity is that it seeks not to make good people better, but bad people holy". (*Michael Marshall, Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of London*).

A living catholic tradition to carry the gifts of the past into the future

Catholic tradition is not an unchanging body of teachings and attitudes that we are supposed to adopt wholesale. That would simply be an alternative form of fundamentalism. As the one-time Anglican, John Henry, Cardinal Newman remarked, speaking of tradition itself, "to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often". At the same time, we would be foolish and faithless to change at random, or *simply* to follow the spirit of the age.

Anglican Catholic tradition is like an organic growth, which remains rooted and fed by the inheritance of the past, but also evolves and adapts to new knowledge and experience, testing the compatibility of the new in the light of the old. Anglican Catholics, therefore, can welcome the ordination of women seeing it, not as a radical denial of tradition, but as a legitimate development within it, which so far from undermining the Church's traditional understanding of priestly ministry, actually deepens and enriches it. In the same way many would affirm the grace of God in faithful same-sex relationships, and believe that this understanding represents a proper extension of, not a threat to, the Christian theology of marriage.

Similarly we can encourage developments in Catholic liturgy, which combine intelligibility and accessibility with the depth and mystery that have been its traditional hallmarks. We should promote real bible study, which takes on board the insights of biblical scholarship and seeks to close the gap between academic theology and parish teaching. Catholics should support an open debate on sexuality and the family, to explore new possibilities of unity with other denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, and to be more daring to tear down ancient barriers. Likewise, we are not threatened by other faith traditions, realising that the Spirit of God speaks through all things, not least other religions. Because of our understanding of the essence of the Christian faith as inclusive, Anglo-Catholics need not be as fearful as some other Christians at dialogue, and even worship, with members of other Faiths.

In recent years an instinctive and seemingly fearful opposition to any new development became the hallmark of Anglo-Catholicism. Yet in all these contemporary issues, as in those of the past and in those yet to come, a genuinely Catholic approach will avoid both a congealed traditionalism that opposes all change, and a rootless liberalism, which embraces any change uncritically.

The essence of Anglo Catholicism, therefore, is the Incarnation of God in Christ, realising in him a cosmic dimension that means that we can find God in all things.

2. The historical roots of Anglo-Catholicism.

The Reformation

Although the 16th century reformation changed the Church of England in many fundamental ways it never completely eroded its catholic roots. Indeed, Queen Elizabeth I had been determined to uphold the principle of inclusivity and desired that the Church of England should remain just that – a church to embrace all English people.

In the course of the next century there had been many examples of the way in which the Catholic (and, in some ways, Orthodox) roots of the Church continued to be a source of spiritual and theological nourishment. From the 17th cent. re-emergence of a form of Religious Life with the Little Gidding community under the courtier of Charles II, Nicholas Ferrer, to the growing interest in the theology of the early Church as encounters Orthodoxy developed with the expansion of the importance of England on the world scene. However, it is widely recognised that the 18th cent. were, in many ways, a time when the Church was in decline, both spiritually and theologically. Into this gap stepped men like John Wesley who encouraged the development of Methodism within the Church of England, the movement only forming a separate church at his death. There was also a more general evangelical revival in the early 19th century.

The Oxford Movement

A little later the Oxford Movement aimed at restoring Catholic principles in the face of growing apathy and perceived 'liberalism' in theology. The plan to suppress ten Irish bishoprics in 1833 evoked from John Keble, a leading priest in Oxford, a sermon in the University Church which is regarded as the beginning of the movement.

Its chief object was the defence of the Church of England as a Divine institution, of the doctrine of the Apostolic Succession, and of the Book of Common Prayer as a rule of faith. *The Tracts for the Times*, a series of pamphlets that encouraged people to think more deeply about the Faith, were designed for this purpose. The clerical leaders of the movement were Keble, J. H. Newman (who later joined the RC Church and became a famous cardinal) and E. B. Pusey. It soon gained influential support, but it was also attacked by the liberals within the University and by the Bishops. Within the movement there gradually arose a party that tended towards submission to Rome. But the majority remained in the Church of England and despite the hostility of the press and of the Government, the movement spread. Its influence was exercised in the sphere of worship and ceremonial, in the social sphere (the slum settlements were among its notable achievements), and in the restoration of the religious life in the Church of England.

Anglo-Catholicism asserted the historic claims of the Church of England - the Church of Augustine and Anselm, as well as the Church of Cranmer and Laud - to be the Catholic Church in England. The distinctive claims of Roman Catholicism, especially as regards England, were thought to be erroneous. As *Article XXXVII* of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* said, 'The Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England.' At the same time, there was a fascination with the culture and fashions of contemporary Roman Catholicism, especially the continental variety.

The Ritualists, in particular, were concerned to recover for the Church of England all the privileges of Catholicism: the Mass at the centre of the Christian life, the Reserved Sacrament as a sign of God's promise to tabernacle among his people, the place of Our Lady, the celebration of seven sacraments (and in particular Penance and Healing), and the joy and wonder of Catholic worship, with its appeal to all five senses. Made defiant by the verdict of Pope Leo XIII in 1896 that the Anglican Church lacked Catholic orders, Anglo-Catholicism continued to grow in the first half of the twentieth century.

Later developments

In the last thirty or forty years of the twentieth century, thoughtful Anglo-Catholics have wondered whether they had 'lost the battle but won the war': Anglo-Catholicism was in steep decline: meanwhile Anglicanism, worldwide, had accepted so much of what Anglo-Catholics had campaigned for. Perhaps Anglo-Catholicism was more like yeast within the church, yeast that makes bread rise, a not inappropriate image for a movement whose energy and focus is the Mass. At the same time, ecumenical understanding was growing, especially since the Second Vatican Council, and Anglo-Catholics - and indeed Anglicans as a whole - became much less certain that the distinctive claims of Rome must be rejected. The *Anglican-Roman Catholic Intentional Commission* explored, amongst other things, Roman ideas of primacy and the role of the successor of Peter. Anglicans became more relaxed about the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the British Isles and were as likely, it seems, to refer to 'Catholics' when they meant 'Roman Catholics' as Anglicans of an earlier generation were to refer rather rudely to 'Romans'.

A painful division between those who whole-heartedly welcomed the priesting of women and those who believed that the priesting of women was either impossible or ecumenically inexpedient created a new movement within Anglo-Catholicism that accepted this development and affirmed that God in Christ embraced the whole of our humanity and recognised that the priest is not the icon of Christ – rather the icon of Christ is whole people of God, gathering at the altar.

The battle for things like votive candles in cathedrals and Holy Week liturgies in parish churches was won, but the war - and the 'vision glorious' of the Tractarian pioneers of the Anglo-Catholic revival - was all but over.

3. Catholicism and its place in the life of the Church today.

Catholicism is essential to the nature of the Church for it maintains the principle that we are part of the universal Church located both in time and eternity. St. Andrews (or St. Agnes) does not exist in limbo: we are intimately connected with the Church in Iraq, Trinidad, Russia, Palestine – wherever Christians profess their faith in ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.’ Their joys and their pains are ours.

Catholicism also roots us in the life of the saints, of the Church throughout the ages. We are one with Andrew, Agnes, Benedict, Francis, Theresa and all those whose lives we celebrate eucharistically. Our faith is not just a Sunday pastime; it concerns the whole of our life and our eternal destiny. The purpose of our Christian commitment and Church life is to change us into the people God wants us to become – forever.

In this process, Catholicism draws on many resources amongst which figure the Scriptures (the Bible), tradition and human wisdom. Bp. Richard Hooker first articulated our approach to reading and interpreting the Bible in the 16th Century. While Christians universally acknowledge the Bible as the Word of God and completely sufficient to our reconciliation to God, what the Bible says must always speak to us in our own time and place. The Church, as a worshipping body of faithful people, has for two thousand years amassed experience of God and of loving Jesus, and what they have said to us through the centuries about the Bible is critical to our understanding it in our own context. The traditions of the Church in interpreting Scripture connect all generations of believers together and give us a starting point for our own understanding. We believe that every Christian must build an understanding and relationship with God’s Word in the Bible, and to do that, God has given us intelligence and our own experience - “Reason”. We will be people of "faith seeking understanding" (*St. Augustine*), who realise that faith, which is blind, is of no use and tends to produce irrationality and fanaticism.

Catholics, therefore, cannot ignore the wider world nor limit God’s activity to some religious ghetto. We accept that Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) fills the whole world. (*Wisdom 1:7*)

Spiritual development

Whilst Catholic Christianity challenges us to build the *whole* of our lives with Christ at the centre, it offers us the wisdom and resources of centuries to help us grow up spiritually. It encourages us to make a rule of life - to commit ourselves to a pattern of worship each Sunday, of daily prayer and regular Bible reading. By

sharing in the Eucharist and, if we can, in the daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, we unite ourselves with a continuous worldwide cycle of worship across the seasons, feasts and fasts of the liturgical year. In the writings of the Church Fathers, the Saints, and of more recent spiritual authors, we are given a treasury of guidance to help us in our personal journey of prayer and meditation. Catholic tradition encourages us to find Spiritual Direction, and offers sacramental Confession as a chance to open ourselves to God and overhaul our spiritual lives regularly. It provides retreats and refreshment with our Religious communities, which are powerhouses of the Spirit. It supplies renewal and inspiration, as well as fun and fellowship, in pilgrimages to shrines and holy places.

Personal development

In face of the various kinds of fundamentalism on offer today, we have to insist that God speaks to us through reason as well as through tradition and scripture. Whatever our intellectual capacity, and whatever our place in life, we are all called to integrate our reason and our belief, and to be able to give an account of that belief to those around us. We do not accept a dualistic approach to body and spirit, nor ignore the human but rather affirm that, through the Incarnation, God embraced the physical world that becomes the primary locus of Divine activity.

Nor can Catholic Christianity be privatised. God made us social beings to care for each other. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God himself is a kind of community - three persons existing in perfect union - and we are made in the Divine image. We can only develop into the people God wants us to be through our relationships with the Trinity and one other. *'We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one Body. Let us then pursue all that leads to peace and builds up the common life.'* Those words introduce the Peace at Mass on most Sundays. They state what we are called to be. Catholics need to consider, as we offer the kiss of peace, whether we mean them. We are called, by Christ, to repent of anything less by pursuing all that leads to peace and building up the common life. All that we do and say during the Mass and in church reflects the extent to which we are seeking to put those words into practise. Anyone entering a catholic church for the first time has a right to expect to encounter a group of people who are – struggling – to practise their faith. But such a calling to pursue all that leads to peace and builds up the common life extends to all that we do as the People of God, both corporately and individually.

4. Conclusion

Bp. Michael Marshall (*Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of London*) said that Anglican Catholicism exists to remind the Church that “the acid test of a truly

Catholic Christianity is that it seeks not to make good people better, but bad people holy.” Catholicism is essential to the nature of the Church because it prevents faith from becoming privatised. By placing the Sacraments at the heart of the Church it proclaims that all life is holy; that God is to be known and worshipped in all things. All life is sacramental, an outward and visible manifestation of the Divine nature. It seeks to integrate the Incarnation of God in Christ and the Redemption of the world through his life, death and resurrection. It is prepared to accept that life is paradoxical and it is only when we are prepared to grasp the complexities of creation that we begin to live. Archbishop Rowan Williams recently called for Anglo-Catholics to affirm their faith *'in its power and fullest sense,'* not as *'lifeboat in which to escape the present'* but as *'a crucible in which the experiment of Christian life is constantly tested.'*

Anglican Catholics are, fundamentally, called to acknowledge the primacy of their humanity made in the image of God. We share the same joys and sorrows, pains and pleasures of all people. We look expectantly to the future whilst celebrating the good things of the past. Rooted in our creative God we are not trapped by what has been but celebrate what God is doing. That means accepting the challenge and wonderful mystery of our Christian belief - that humanity, reconciled with God, finds new life and purpose in Christ. We must change and grow into what God wills us, each and all of us, to be. That is why we can be unafraid of developments in the church and world but seek to employ our God-given reason as fresh things emerge. New understandings of the role of women and men in the church, issues of human sexuality, concerns for the environment, genetics, social justice, international trade – these and all the other issues that concern our world can be creatively embraced by our faith. Catholic Anglicans will turn to the mystery of the Trinity’s outpouring love and the Incarnation of the Word of God. We acknowledge the mysterious way in which it is only by accepting the way of suffering and death in life that we will, in the end, discover that fullness of life that is God’s promise and gift.

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.’ (John 1:1-3, 14)

(With thanks to extracts from 'A Manual of Anglo-Catholic Devotion' published by Canterbury Press ISBN 1-85311-354-9 and 'Affirming Catholicism': www.affirmingcatholicism.org.uk for some material)