

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION ON THE MARRIAGE CANON

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The essential questions about any law or any institution are questions about the ends they exist to serve.¹ This is true because good laws and healthy institutions are grounded in the nature of God the Trinity, in Whom infinite or limitless Goodness or Being, Wisdom, and Love coinhere.² That is, the Good that God is (the Father) is Known (the Son or Word) and Willed (the Spirit). What is true above all of God is true of all that proceeds from God in creation: what exists is good to the extent that it exists, and it is sustained in being by an act of knowledge and love. And, insofar as Christ has called us friends, we are called to participate in God's own knowledge and love both of Himself and of Creation as proceeding from and returning to God. We do this above all in the wonder and adoration that is prayer and worship – that 'wonder' that Aristotle marks as the root of all science, poetry, literature, art and music in the opening pages of the *Metaphysics* and the reality and importance of which Plato draws into the light of recognition and understanding in the *Phaedrus*. We wonder at God, but we also wonder at the mystery of created things, the good but finite things which proceed into existence through God's infinite Wisdom or Word and his Spirit or Love. Each kind of wonder often leads to the other, and strengthens it.

Confessing faith in the Trinity as we do, then, as a Church we must address questions about the good served by the canons and customs which shape our life together in Christ. This necessity arises from the Foundation and Root of everything we are and believe: God the Holy Trinity. Love and Wisdom, Will and Understanding are distinct but inseparable and both rooted in the Being or Goodness of God in the life of the Trinity. They are found apart in creation only by a bending of the will against the good that is known to God and knowable in principle by human beings. This is the essential characteristic of sin. This is the negative side of positive truths: the creation of human beings in the image of God, the end of human life as that union with God which is the fulfillment of all human capacities for vision, the Christian life as a life of continual conversion – continual turning toward the good that God gives us to know in repentance and renewed desire.

¹ Richard Hooker argues in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book I, especially the opening chapters.

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² This is (very roughly) St Augustine's account in his treatise *On the Trinity* and elsewhere. I am aware of the Eastern account, which begins with the principle that what exists can be known, and that therefore God cannot be said to exist, because we cannot comprehend God. See Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).

In *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Richard Hooker sums up the implications of this understanding of God, of law, and of sin, for our understanding of what it means to be human.

Capable we are of God both by understanding and will: by understanding, as He is that sovereign Truth which comprehendeth the rich treasures of all wisdom; by will, as He is that sea of Goodness whereof whoso tasteth shall thirst no more. As the will doth now work upon that object by desire, which is as it were a motion towards the end as yet unobtained; so likewise upon the same hereafter received it shall work also by love.

Hooker then quotes St Augustine's great work *On the Trinity*, 'The longing disposition of them that thirst is changed into the sweet affection of them that taste and are replenished.'³

This end is something all human beings seek by nature, but apart from the humility of God in Christ this natural desire is subject to a tragic contradiction. We cannot consistently and faithfully will what we do not believe to be possible. In Christ we see that union of divinity and our humanity which is the end toward which all our restless desires are reaching, however blindly and hopelessly. At the same time, we also discover in him the way to that end, and that it is possible.⁴

As Hooker would read Romans 1, then, St Paul is pointing to the fact a preoccupation with sensual pleasures arises from despair with respect to our humanity. In the language of moral theology, it is the fruit of sloth, acedia, which Kathleen Norris identifies as the characteristic spiritual malaise of our time.⁵ Read in this way, what St Paul has to say about sexuality in Romans 1 is a message not for some but for all, regardless of who or what they do or do not find sexually attractive. Especially it is a message for a culture which has embraced sexual intercourse as an end in itself, cut off from its chief natural and biological end, conception. To say this is not necessarily to require of anyone that they agree in every way with all that Pope Paul VI said in *Humanae Vitae* or what the Roman Church has demanded of its members. It is simply to draw attention to the fact that until very recently there was unanimity across all kinds of confessional and ecclesiastical divisions that pleasures of sexual intimacy cannot become ends in themselves without dehumanizing us.

³ Book I, chapter xi, section 3.

⁴ See Hooker's discussion of the way of grace, 'mystical and supernatural', in which we walk by faith, hope, and charity in Book I, chapter xi, section 6.

⁵ Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York, NY: Riverhead, 2008).

‘A WAY MYSTICAL AND SUPERNATURAL’ – THE WAY OF GRACE

The Anglican Church began to wrestle with these questions before the second World War. Bishop Charles Gore of Oxford was particularly vocal and clear. The process of reflection and discussion that began then was swept away by the Nazi catastrophe and then, in quick succession, by the advent of cheap contraceptives readily available, and the sexual revolution. Without political power or influence, and in a culture that has no interest whatever in what the Church has to say on these subjects, we now have the freedom to think together about what is best and commend it to those who are able to bear it amongst those who are walking in the way of repentance and the renewal of desire.

In order to walk in the way of repentance through Christ and in his Spirit to the true homeland of human desire and understanding in the Trinity, Hooker argues that we require outward and visible means to effect and sustain that complete union with Christ that is the foundation of this way. These are the Sacraments, and especially Holy Baptism and Holy Communion (the ‘moral’ instruments of salvation – things to be done), and the Scriptures (the ‘doctrinal’ instrument of salvation, teaching what it is necessary to know). However, though we are entirely and immediately united to Christ by that grace through which God has reconciled us to himself, an endless ascent in love and wisdom into the heart of the Trinity remains.⁶ This ascent is the substance of eternal life. This life, which is the very life of God, we share now in a life of repentance by faith, hope, and charity. We look to share it more fully in a life that will also be characterized by a continual turning away from ourselves to go deeper into the mystery of God in the vision of God hereafter.

This understanding of Christian faith and life is announced each time we celebrate the Holy Communion in the words of the Collect for Purity. There we address God as knowing our hearts and desires utterly, so that from him ‘no secrets are hid’. We then ask that God would cleanse what he finds there by the inspiration of his Spirit. In theological terms, our life in Christ is understood here as the means of lifting up and purifying desire. When, later in the service, the priest bids us lift up their hearts, it is because all that has preceded has been to prepare us to do just this. The end of this elevation and purification of desire is clear: that we might perfectly love God with all the powers of understanding and desire with which we have been blessed and glorify him by obedience. An inner movement of the mind and heart to God thus has an outer aspect, in which the whole self, body, mind, and soul are carried and transfigured by knowledge and desire.

⁶ I mean to recall here the distinction between the grace of ‘justification’ and that of ‘sanctification’ by which the sixteenth-century reformers re-stated and clarified the doctrine of grace, illuminating Christian faith and life.

EROS, CHASTITY, AND THE PATTERN OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

The proposal to bless long term committed relationships between people of the same sex raise questions that are important for every Christian in the modern Western world, married or single, regardless of the particular forms that eros takes in our souls. I mean by eros not simply sexual desire, but all loves based on need or desire, as in Plato, Augustine, Dante, and many others. Understood in this way, eros includes sexual desire, but it also includes the deepest and most noble desires of the human heart for truth, beauty, goodness, justice – for those good things to which Jesus points in the Beatitudes: the poverty that hungers and thirsts for the best things of which human beings are capable.

This hunger and thirst is characteristic of chastity, when chastity is understood apart from all Manichean distortions as serving the redemption and not the rejection of the body.⁷ In a compelling discussion, Josef Pieper argues that the purpose of chastity is the cultivation of just such ‘a direct, innocent, and selfless vision of reality’ which alone make possible an inner moral order and honest moral decisions. He continues,

Chastity...renders one able to perceive reality and ready not only for the perception and thus also for decision corresponding to reality, but also for that highest mode of relating oneself to reality in which the purest dedication to knowledge and the most selfless dedication in love become one, namely, contemplation, in which man turns toward the divine Being and becomes aware of that truth which is at once the highest good.

To be open to the truth of real things and to live by the truth that one has grasped is the essence of the moral being. Only when we recognize this state of things can we likewise understand the depths to which the unchaste heart permits destruction to invade its very being.⁸

The debate about ‘marriage’ mightily distracts us as individual Christians and as a Church from really vital issues that concern not a subset of society or of the Church, but all of us. It distracts us from questions about what it is to be human and to live a truly human life. It distracts us from a consideration of friendship, and of the good of friendship as distinct from that of marriage. It distracts us from reflecting critically in a way that is long overdue on the assumption that friendship is trumped and completed by romance, and that romance is sealed and fulfilled above all in sexual intercourse. It distracts us from the task

⁷ Sergius Bulgakov’s remark that we must crucify the flesh in order to gain a body comes to mind. Bulgakov’s thought was the subject of Rowan Williams’ doctoral dissertation.

⁸ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 162.

of renewing friendship and community in a dispirited age by the rediscovery of the love of the best things: justice, mercy, truth, beauty, goodness – God Himself, his holy angels, and ourselves as made in his image.

The pattern of spiritual life to which Anglicans fall heir brings together enormous and powerful resources for this task, while leaving us open to learn from anyone anywhere at any time. The tradition to which we belong takes every time of day, every season of the year and time of life, every honest calling and provides opportunity for it to be made into the stuff of prayer and growth in love.⁹ It allows fully that the road can begin anywhere at any time for anyone. The Christian community envisioned in the *Book of Common Prayer* is a roomy one, with a place for ‘all sorts and conditions’. On one side, there is room for those who give God little or not thought at all. The daily office and the Church Year go on, offered on behalf of saints and those who offer no prayer of their own, mirroring the patience and constancy of God toward the whole human race opened to us in somewhat different ways by the office lectionary and the ancient Eucharistic lectionary (historical and doctrinal, respectively). On the other, the pattern of spiritual life we have inherited can challenge and engage the best of every gift and energy we can bring to it. It can also bring shape and direction to the deepest and most enduring passions of the human heart, not destroying them, but drawing them to the fulfillment they themselves seek.

THE PROMISE OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

In my own experience as a priest and pastor, Christians tire of a faith which appears to have as its end ‘going to Church’. The time is right to recover Christian faith as an adventure of the heart and soul, an ascent of the whole person with the help of eros ever deeper into the heart of the Trinity, and as a pilgrimage which draws us out of ourselves and into fellowship and communion. Many both within and without the Church point to the way in which the western world is sick of itself. We need an authentic, earnest quest to rediscover those things through the love of which every aspect of human life can be made holy and ennobled. We in the Anglican Church of Canada risk perpetuating our confusions and those of our culture, when the opportunity is before us in all humility to accept our fallibility, recognize our failures, and embrace the freedom which we have in Christ to make of our lives a continual prayer, a continual demand, declared not only by our lips but in our lives, for the restoration of our lost humanity, for love of God and love of neighbour. At the

⁹ Evelyn Underhill begins to show how this can be so in works like *The Mystery of Sacrifice: A Meditation on the Liturgy*. She has not grasped the genius of the reformed catholicism of the Prayer Book in the way that Martin Thornton does in his chapter on the subject in *English Spirituality*, let alone some more recent writers – many of whom are Canadian. But she provides a very helpful place to begin.

same time, we risk isolating ourselves, when twenty-first century reality is calling us into deeper communion.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Hooker discusses the dangers of such isolation, and puts before his readers the advantages to be gained from 'mutual communion' amongst Christian churches in Book I, chapter x, section 14.