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A More Honorable Way

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In the past two years, more than 200 Episcopal bishops, priests, and deacons have left the ministry “for reasons not affecting moral character” (language that indicates a departure from the church for reasons of conscience). The notices arrive almost daily in my diocesan mailbox – depositions, removals, renunciations, many of them bearing the names of beloved friends.

Three bishops left The Episcopal Church for the Roman Catholic Church in the past year, and several others have departed for alternative Anglican jurisdictions. (Whatever one thinks about these jurisdictions – and I believe that they represent a seriously disordered way to deal with ecclesiastical conflict – they are clearly a “fact on the ground” with which we must deal.) The church is bleeding, and we face a crisis of unprecedented proportions. I can think of no other time in this church’s history when leaders have left in such massive numbers. Clergy are leaving, as well as parishes, and an entire diocese.

In the face of this painful reality, I am convinced that the church has made a significant error. We have turned to the canons as the primary way to navigate the treacherous waters of our Anglican conflict. A case in point: the recent depositions of the Rt. Rev. John-David Schofield, Bishop of San Joaquin, and the Rt. Rev. William Cox, retired Bishop Suffragan of Maryland and Assistant Bishop of Oklahoma, for abandoning the communion of the church. Clearly, they were guilty of canonical violations. Bishop Schofield had led (or sought to lead) his diocese out of The Episcopal Church. Bishop Cox had performed episcopal acts without appropriate permission. The question does not, however, simply have to do with their “guilt.” Given the reality of our conflict, should we be invoking the canons as our way to deal with the tragedy we face?

Important questions have been raised concerning the canonical process surrounding the depositions, and I share those concerns. Did we honor the letter as well as the spirit of Canon IV.9? On several grounds (lack of what appears to be the canonically mandated quorum and, in Bishop Cox’s case, a failure to observe the canon’s time line and the requirement for prior inhibition) the answer may well be “No.” At a minimum, many persons have respectfully questioned the canon’s application in these cases.

While I voted against the depositions, I did not cast my vote on the grounds of possible canonical inconsistencies. Rather, I was motivated by another consideration. Should we be using the canons at all? That is the more pertinent question. The canons, after all, represent a “technical” solution to the conflict that has engulfed The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. They are the rules and regulations, the organizational skeleton. Turning to the rule book fails to respond to the complexities over which we struggle. Our issues are at heart theological, spiritual, pastoral and relational. People of good will, acting in accord with their conscience, feel compelled to take action. Some of them leave. I cannot join them. My own convictions require that I remain in the church and remain engaged in its often chaotic life. That is an obligation as solemn as any that I have undertaken.

But how do we respond to those who believe they must depart? How do we say goodbye in a manner that honors the Gospel, indeed honors our Lord himself? John Henry Newman, as he prepared to leave the Church of England for Rome, preached a sermon at St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, titled “The Parting of Friends.” Can we part as friends, without the canonical “death penalty”? Can we say goodbye in a way that enhances the life of the church and leaves open the possibility of the reconciliation?

The canonical actions upon which we’ve embarked inevitably will sow a harvest of bitterness. Dioceses do not depose a priest or a deacon without heartbreaking thought and prayer. Nor did the House of Bishops act against Bishops Schofield and Cox lightly. The moment was profoundly somber. I don’t question the motives of those who have used canonical sanctions, or of my colleagues who voted in favor of the recent depositions. They desire the best for Christ’s church, and believe these canonical actions to be an appropriate response to this wave of departures.

I foresee a plunge into relational disarray. Each time we depose a cleric, the action will become a little easier, a bit less agonized. The gulf between those who remain and those who’ve left will grow so immense that healing will be possible only in the New Jerusalem. The canons, as a response of first resort, cannot help us through this terrible season in the church’s life. They are profoundly inadequate for the crisis. And so I urge three courses of action:

First, we need to fast from canonical action; make a decision that for the moment we will simply do nothing when a bishop or a priest or a deacon departs. This would be the ecclesiastical equivalent of taking a deep breath. As a matter of pastoral strategy, allowing time to pass without canonical action can provide the room for conversation and, perhaps, reconciliation.

Second, we need to look for imaginative ways of surviving this “in the meantime” time. There may be interim agreements between dioceses and parishes and clergy – outside of but not contrary to the canons – that can buy us breathing space. In other words, we should begin by looking for creative, adaptive solutions, ways of dealing with one another non-judicially as the Spirit helps us to sort things out. The Anglican Communion itself is struggling with these matters, not least as we draft an Anglican Covenant. Finding an interim protocol while we work with our Anglican partners can create the setting that enables us, around the Communion, to think and pray together.

Third, we need to revise our canons in the light of the current and tragic reality. Once invoked, all that the current canons allow is the “death penalty.” The canons have no equivalent of a civil proceeding. They are purely criminal. One possible change: Many years ago, the canons permitted missing clergy (who had somehow become inaccessible to their bishops) to be placed on a roster called the Special List of the House of Bishops. It was neither disciplinary nor punitive, but simply descriptive. Perhaps we can find some kind of equivalent in our own day, a way of placing departing clergy on a list that says that they’ve stepped away but will be welcomed home easily and joyfully.

Paul, Barnabas, and Mark provide a model. “After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’ Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out . . . [for] Syria and Cilicia” (Acts 15:36-41). We will never know the details of what transpired, but toward the end of Paul’s life he wrote the Christians in Colossae: “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas,

concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you, welcome him” (Col. 3:10). The separation between Paul, Barnabas, and Mark was, if I may put it in contemporary terms, non-canonical. They moved apart, but made no permanent decision. That very flexibility allowed for the reconciliation which is at the heart of the Gospel.

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