

Episcopal House of Bishops, 15 September 2011, presentation by Don H. Compier on “The Anglican Roots of Liberation Theology”

What a privilege to share with you this day. Your invitation is the greatest honor I have received in my life in the church. Every time I respond to my call to be an educator, I remind myself and my co-students that I will learn more from them than they will from me. That seems patently obvious in this instance! I give thanks to God for the teaching office of bishops. I look forward to our dialogue. I pray that by grace my remarks may stimulate some fruitful thought and conversation.

Providence has permitted me to remain in my Diocese while serving as academic dean of a seminary of the United Methodist Church. I am the only member of our faculty and staff who belongs to the Episcopal Church. It’s a blessing to form new friendships with other heirs of the Wesleys! A few display engaging frankness. So I’ve already heard this question: “since you care about justice for the poor and marginalized, why are you an Episcopalian?” So far time has only allowed sound bite answers. I hope to give a fuller account in the future.

The question deeply saddens me. I yearn for the day when our tradition will be better known by outsiders, and for that matter, by many of our own communicants. I was not born into the Episcopal Church. At age 32, I was confirmed by Bishop Arthur Vogel of the Diocese of West Missouri, at Holy Trinity Church in Independence. And I’ve spent much of my career as a theological educator working in other denominational contexts. I simply do not take our rich heritage for granted. The words of my wonderful Nazarene professor of history, who did so much to introduce me to the Anglican traditions, including the history of the Book of Common Prayer, have stayed with me. He said: “sometimes I think Episcopalians don’t know what they have.” I pray that I might be one of those who will issue constant reminders.

We have many fascinating stories to tell. Allow me to offer just a few examples. In the early 17th century Robert Sanderson, eventually Bishop of Lincoln, condemned assembled jurists from the pulpit for their complicity in the impoverishment of farmers by allowing private interests to enclose village common lands.¹ At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, William Wilberforce, Hannah More, and all the members and supporters of the Clapham Sect waged a 50 year campaign that in the end peacefully abolished slavery throughout the British Empire.² Over the course of her long life, Vida Dutton Scudder served as a leader of the Social Gospel movement, a tireless advocate for and practitioner of education for women and the working classes, a trade unionist and political organizer.³ I hope that as we approach the 50th anniversary of his death, we will fully commemorate the witness of Jonathan Myrick Daniels, who gave up returning to seminary after the historic Selma march in order to continue to lend his full support to the struggle for the voting rights of African Americans and the establishment of true educational equality for all.⁴

In preparing for this dialogue, I have been drawn back again to the witness of Archbishop William Temple.⁵ My father risked his life to listen to underground BBC radio and receive spiritual sustenance from Temple's sermons during the harsh Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Even as a bishop's child, Temple was deeply offended to learn that the servants received different food than that served at his family's table. Throughout his life he lent his full support to the Worker's Educational Association. He sought to elevate the status and pay of female employees of the church. He dared to intervene in coal strikes. Temple announced to his fellow bishops that he had joined the Labor Party. In Christianity and Social Order⁶ he has left us with a blueprint for a just society. Though dated in certain respects—we can no longer assume the establishment, legal or social, of our church—I still recommend it wholeheartedly. I often

point out that according to the good Archbishop, taking one month of paid vacation yearly is a sacred duty!

Let us also remember that William Temple was the principal architect of the World Council of Churches. He understood that ecclesial matters of “Faith and Order” could not be separated from the church’s witness to the world’s “Work and Life.” My good teacher, the leading Protestant theologian of liberation José Míguez Bonino, shared his admiration for Temple. He talked about his ongoing influence in the WCC. Dr. Míguez Bonino always believed that the study documents of the World Council, addressing matters such as technology and the rights of laborers, helped lay the foundations of Latin American Liberation Theology.

I predict that the prophetic witness of this House of Bishops will also go down in history. I give thanks to God for your constant advocacy for the Millennium Development goals. My spouse Yolanda, a citizen of Mexico, and I were moved to tears by your pastoral letter on immigration last year. I understand that the church’s eloquent appeal to remember the poor during the recent budget debacle in Washington, DC, has generated its share of criticism. I hope that you are also hearing the voices of praise and thanksgiving. That’s a chorus I certainly wish to join. Bravo! Thank you.

So it makes perfect sense to talk about Anglican roots of liberation theology. Fuller knowledge of Anglican and Episcopal history demonstrates beyond a doubt that Episcopal advocacy for the poor is very far from being an oxymoron. Quite the contrary!

Permit me to share a cautionary note. The question posed to me at Saint Paul School of Theology could be interpreted to suggest, however unintentionally, that we should find a denominational home that is most supportive of our pre-established social program. In fact, a common criticism of liberation theologians is that they seek to impose the agenda of secular

justice movements on the church. Those who have actually gotten to know key thinkers in person, as I did through my work with Professor Míguez Bonino and in an intimate weekend workshop with Gustavo Gutiérrez, know that the charge is unfair. When I read the words left by our Anglican predecessors, I come to precisely the same conclusions. All of the persons I mentioned previously were ecclesial women and men through and through. They were formed and shaped by regular participation in the rites of the church. You are bishops first and foremost! And so our examination of Anglican roots cannot confine itself to history alone. We must raise theological and spiritual questions as well.

The influential Paul Tillich claimed that most thinkers in our tradition weren't real theologians since they confined themselves too much to liturgical and ascetical reflections instead of examining the depth questions of our culture. He did admit that William Temple was probably an exception,⁷ but close examination of Temple's forbearers and contemporaries demonstrates that in general Tillich's charge was very wide of the mark. Anglican theology has wholeheartedly engaged the world precisely because the Glory of God encountered in the sacraments and in the daily office demands that we do so, in the power of the Spirit and in Christ's name! These regular theophanies, these repeated participations in the life of the Holy Trinity through embodied grace, leave us humbly hesitant to fully embrace philosophical and theological precision of the type in which Tillich excelled. Our respect for the divine mystery means, as my good Bishop, Dean Wolfe, reminded me recently, that we are indeed theologically grounded but not theologically bounded. Our cherished Anglican spirit of moderation should not make us excessively shy about sharing the virtues of our interpretation of the Christian Gospel. It won't do to claim, as students of mine often have, that "Anglicans do liturgy, not theology." We

call that a false dichotomy! Because we do liturgy, we must reflect on it. Liturgical theology is real theology!

And so, if we wish to uncover the enduring Anglican roots of liberation theology, we must examine how ecclesial women and men in our tradition describe their experience of God's call to justice in and through their regular participation in the worship, personal and corporate, of the church. It's impossible to adequately tap this rich mother lode in this brief presentation. I'll confine myself to some reflections on the Eucharist inspired by the writings of English theologians, who were all church leaders and often bishops, in the years from the publication of *Lux Mundi* in 1889 up to and including Temple's exercise of the archbishoprics of York and Canterbury.⁸ I am convinced that their significant work on behalf of the poor emerged from the way that they were regularly transformed through their participation of the sacraments. Their awareness of the key role of Holy Communion in this process is remarkable. They did not have our 1979 Prayer Book, which placed the Lord's table in so central a position, and made the links between right worship and right proclamation and action in the world much more explicit. Our core manual is itself a blessed legacy made possible by their contributions, also an influence in the ecumenical liturgical revival of the twentieth century.

The subtitle of *Lux Mundi* establishes the leading motif: *the Religion of the Incarnation*. For us the Word made flesh is not an abstract theological doctrine or an event long past, but our ordinary experience in church as the Son gives himself to us again and again in the form of bread and wine. Sunday after Sunday we, flesh and blood people, rehearse the drama of God's redemption. Participation in Eucharist gives us new sets of eyes to see the world in wholly different ways. Practice around the table prepares us to encounter God's presence everywhere, as in the faces of the poor. Little wonder that Henry Scott Holland, one of the most brilliant

prophetic preachers in Anglican history, would conclude that “the Cross and Resurrection are the meaning of the world itself.”⁹ I am confident that he would have resonated with Jon Sobrino’s description of the poor as “the crucified people.”¹⁰ Perhaps the even greater miracle is that we, with all our manifest flaws, are remade in Eucharist to become Christ’s incarnate body in the world. Our Lord, who stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross to bring all people into the divine embrace, now acts as we reach out our hands in love, clothed in the Holy Spirit.¹¹ The astonishing fecundity of the principle of incarnation evokes creaturely adoration of the Creator and a profound yearning to devote our whole lives to God’s loving purpose for all of creation.

Within the overall theological framework stressing God made flesh for the sake of all, I detect two important subthemes I would like to discuss in turn: participation and sacrifice. Reflection on participation has a long history in Anglicanism. At the close of the sixteenth century it was Richard Hooker’s leading motif in the lengthy fifth book of his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, where he offered something like a commentary on the Book of Common Prayer.¹² In Incarnation, God regularly participates in all of human life. Writers in our tradition look to the most ancient Christian traditions to express their profound admiration for the divine humility thus demonstrated. Having laid aside the divine glory, as it were, having emptied the divine self, the Holy One now invites us to participate in the very life of the Trinity. I don’t know how to adequately do honor in words to this astonishing generosity—amazing grace indeed!

It took us a long time to fully realize the implications. God’s participation and invitation to participation completely level the playing field. “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” yes, and one communion rail, and one bread and one cup offered in the same manners, regardless of any human distinctions. In our time we have made significant strides to

assure that everyone has access to this Eucharistic experiment in equality. It now grieves us to read about the struggles of our African American sisters and brothers, like Absalom Jones and Alexander Crummell, to receive authority to administer the holy sacrament, and even after ordination, to gain full admittance to the college of celebrants.¹³ It is heartbreaking to remember the fierce resistance of his own local congregation to Jonathan Myrick Daniels' insistence that everyone, black and white, was warmly invited to share at Christ's one table. We have come a long way, praise God. But I try to ask myself these questions every time I receive communion: who is supposed to be here but isn't yet? Why aren't they here? Have they been invited? Do they or would they feel welcome? Christ's table has unlimited seating capacity. Christ can bring out a leaf to expand the table at any time. And yet somehow it always remains round, and everyone is equally close to the host. Every seat is the place of honor. Come one, come all! All are heartily welcome. All are honored guests. And all become one body. Eucharist reveals that every human being is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones.

If, as our theological forbearers insisted, the reality encountered in Holy Communion is the core truth of the entire universe, then inequality of any kind is simply unnatural. If all can come to the table of our Lord, the Cosmocrator, Pantocrator, Lord of all, a global economic system that excludes the vast majority of our one human body from adequate nutrition, healthcare, sanitation, education, shelter, and safety is intolerable and utterly unacceptable. The body of Christ formed by participation in his body and blood can never make peace with such a situation. Eucharistic Prayer C condemns our "presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength." If I may be so bold, I'd like to take matters a step further and suggest that we come to the table to be disquieted and disturbed, to experience something like Holy anger and judgment on the current state of our human race, and to be filled with the Spirit's

prophetic fire to set this age ablaze as we challenge the principalities and powers in Christ's name. The Abba of Jesus is the God of life, not death! Ezekiel reminds us that God desires the death of no one (18:32). And, as father Gutiérrez has always insisted, systemic, global poverty is just that, early and unjust death.¹⁴ Those of us receiving the bread of life at the table of God's reign simply must do everything in our power to oppose the forces that maim and destroy so many precious persons made in the divine image.

Because things aren't the way they are supposed to be, because we are broken, because creation itself groans, sacrifice becomes inevitable. The theological era I have drawn on for inspiration in these remarks is often criticized for stressing Incarnation so much that it forgot the Cross.¹⁵ I disagree. This, after all, was the generation that lived through the horrors and massive losses of the First World War. And in any case, participation in the Eucharist did not allow them, or us, to overlook that Christ died for us.

The sacrificial theme has received abundant theological criticism during recent decades. We certainly don't wish to depict God as a monster demanding the death of the innocent child to propitiate the crimes of the guilty. As William Temple always insisted, every practice and doctrine of the church makes a statement about God's character, so we must be sure that our example and our teaching safeguard the divine honor.¹⁶ Moreover, we must never imply that Christ's giving of himself shows that it is Christian for oppressed persons to suffer social wrongs without protest or complaint. And we do well to remember that substitutionary atonement theories are only one of the multiple ways in which the motif of Christ's sacrifice has been interpreted across the centuries. Our Eucharistic prayers can be read various ways and certainly don't intend to enshrine one redemptive paradigm at the expense of other legitimate ones.

The abuse or distortion of core Christian convictions never means that we should jettison them. We cannot get around the brute fact of Jesus' dreadful execution by torture—"Christ has died." We cannot deny that the earliest texts of the New Testament insist that we proclaim the crucified One as the bearer and actualizer of God's saving wisdom and power. Yes, Christ is risen and Christ will come again, but only after undergoing the agony of the Cross. Here focusing on Jesus' humanity comes to the same conclusion as the church's affirmation of Christ's divinity. Out of love for us, God the Son humbled himself, even to death on the cross. He gives his whole life to us, at great cost. Redemption never comes at a bargain rate. Grace is not cheap. My English theological guides insisted that in Christ God had taken on the pain of the whole world. Temple was willing to suggest that God's own self suffers.¹⁷

Once again, contemplation and reception of these holy mysteries at the Lord's table stirs deep gratitude in our hearts. That is of course the meaning of the Greek roots of our word Eucharist: to give thanks. In return for God's sacrificial love, we dedicate our whole selves as an offer of praise and thanksgiving. We present all our gifts to be consecrated to the divine purpose. We ask to be united with Christ in his sacrifice.

Or do we? Are we holding anything back? Speaking for myself, I suggest that the persistent reality of massive world hunger and the growing inequality in the US proves that I am. The Millennium Development Goals will never be realized unless people like me in the "First World" sacrifice our excess wealth. And even in the richest nations many will not earn a living wage as long as we tolerate gross maldistribution of wealth. We must change our standard of living in a downward direction. I must sacrifice cherished enjoyments of mine such as international vacations, a new car, a spacious home, the arts, a secure retirement plan, and maybe even books! Such notions, of course, violate the core beliefs of our dominant culture and

economic system. We find ourselves trapped in fears and social expectations. How often I have identified with the cry of the father of the epileptic boy in Mark 9:24:“Lord I believe; help my unbelief!”

Bishop Charles Gore understood that God’s sacrificial saving work in Christ was needed to set us at liberty.¹⁸ Without the costly divine accomplishment, we cannot enjoy the freedom to offer proper sacrifices. The “freedom” proclaimed in our culture of consumption is actually an insidious form of bondage. We think we owe things when in fact they own us. Only in the service of God do we find perfect freedom. Liberation theology insists on the preferential option for the poor, but its proponents have always understood that God’s justice, and only God’s justice, will also break the bonds of the prosperous. I find myself in need of confession at every celebration of the Eucharist! God, grant us strength in all goodness, and the power of the Spirit to live your true life!

I hope by now that my central argument is evident. I believe that we are called first and foremost not to any social agenda or program of justice but to be and experience Church. We are beckoned, drawn, to participate in the life and work of the Holy Trinity who humbly and sacrificially meets us in and through the rites of our human, all too human, lovely Book of Common Prayer. I simply don’t understand how we can go through these transformative encounters without being sent to become fully committed to the cause of the poor in today’s world. If we are rooted in God we will effectually embrace all of God’s people, the majority of whom live in dire deprivation today. Each of them has hopes and dreams just like ours. Each of them has unique gifts, God-given abilities that our whole human body needs. Death before its time, lives warped by constant anxiety, pain, and hunger, and un- and underemployment waste God’s bounty and therefore represent massive sin against the Holy Spirit. Eucharistically shaped

people are sickened by these realities and stirred up to protest and work for the establishment of God's vision.

At my station in life I've largely given up trying to be original. I'm content to try and restate the obvious. Except that what is obvious to us isn't transparently cogent to many. How do we assure the transmission of our wonderful legacy of faith, so that it might continually spur grateful and faithful responses? More than ever we need good catechesis and thorough spiritual formation. Who will lead them? Who will be our guides?

Holland, Gore, Temple, and company were thoroughly learned individuals. When their life-long piety was leavened by their first rate education, their powerful witness blessed the church and the larger society. We can still count on some devoted servants cut from their cloth. And we should remember their passionate commitment to the educational and spiritual empowerment of all persons from all classes. How do we live out this vision today?

I come to you, of course, as a person with a vocation to theological education. I have been greatly blessed to be a student, faculty member, and dean at fine seminaries. But the elite nature of seminary education in the first world has long troubled my conscience. Due to the eloquence and expertise of our Presiding Bishop on this topic, you already know the facts: students owe an average debt of over \$35,000 upon completion of a Master of Divinity; counting displacement and lost wages, including those of spouses, the total cost of a Master of Divinity is about \$100,000. Let us also remember that students can complete a year of seminary in many good institutions of the so-called "Third World," including room and board, for what one course's tuition costs in the US. The missional implications are frightening. In every nation, and around the globe, areas experiencing the greatest church growth and need for the Good News are

the most undercapitalized and therefore least able to afford seminary educated clergy and lay leaders. From a liberation perspective these realities cry out for reform.

The emergence of local formation programs in many dioceses represents one salutary response. I am attempting to convince my seminary colleagues that these diocesan schools and provincial networks are here to stay and absolutely necessary if all areas of the church are to have trained and formed ordained and lay leadership. Moreover, these initiatives embody one of the core values of liberation theology, namely contextually appropriate ministry. Seminary faculty should become involved as partners with these endeavors. They should realize that there are many fine teachers at our diocesan schools who don't hold doctorates, and many worthy holders of Ph.D's who may not have landed one of the few seminary jobs available in any given year yet desire to pursue their vocation to theological education.

On the other hand, I am pleading that we don't neglect the resources gathered at our seminaries. We still have many fine professors who out of love for the church took on considerable additional debt and expense to become qualified to be involved in the graduate preparation of church leaders and ministers. We will always need some people with advanced degrees as part of the team responsible for educating and forming all ministers of the church. Our seminaries may need to consolidate and reform, but we cannot do without the continuing existence of some stable centers for graduate theological education.

Wherever our future leaders study, the examples of Holland, Gore and Temple urge us to establish and maintain the highest possible standards. We must become well acquainted with our forerunners in the communion of saints, and we must rigorously reflect on and respond to God's revelation in the worship of the Church. These predecessors clearly demonstrate that there need not be any contradiction between serious scholarship and complete devotion to the mission

entrusted to our community of faith. We love and serve God with our whole selves, including our minds. No other response to God's sacrificial and generous gifts would be proper. And the urgent realities of God's poor require nothing less.

May I conclude with one of Holland's invocations of Jesus: "Fill us with thy sorrow, if so only thou canst fill us with thyself."¹⁹ Amen.

¹ Sanderson has been unjustly neglected. See George Lewis, Robert Sanderson: Chaplain to King Charles the First, Regius Professor of Divinity, Oxford, and Bishop of Lincoln (London: SPCK Press, 1924).

² Thanks to the recent film Amazing Grace, Wilberforce's campaign is now well known, but the role played by More and other female leaders still needs more attention. See Patricia Demers, The World of Hannah More (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

³ Scudder also demands more scholarly attention. One good approach is that of Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, Beyond the Social Maze: Exploring Vida Dutton Scudder's Theological Ethics (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁴ William J. Schneider, American Martyr: The Jonathan Daniels Story (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1992). Daniels is also featured prominently in the third volume of Taylor Branch's Pulitzer Prize winning history of the civil rights era, At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

⁵ There are newer biographies and studies, but I still prefer the account by an associate of Temple, Rev. F.A. Iremonger, William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: His Life and Letters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), because of the priceless glimpse of the man we get from the liberal citations from his letters.

⁶ (Penguin Books, 1942).

⁷ Paul Tillich, A History of Christian Thought (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 301-2 and 359-60.

⁸ I recommend Arthur Michael Ramsey's From Gore to Temple: The Development of Anglican Theology Between Lux Mundi and the Second World War 1889-1939 (London: Longmans, 1960).

⁹ Ramsey, 13.

¹⁰ Sobrino, The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

¹¹ I am of course paraphrasing the collect for mission found in the BCP, 99.

¹² Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book V, ed. Speed Hill, The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1977).

¹³ Absalom Jones has long been commemorated in Lesser Feasts and Fasts. I am glad that Alexander Crummell has been added in Holy Women, Holy Men.

¹⁴ Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ." *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 322.

¹⁵ See Ramsey's discussion, 9.

¹⁶ Cited in Ramsey, 145.

¹⁷ Ramsey, 58.

¹⁸ I highly recommend a (re)reading of Gore's The Body of Christ: An Enquiry into the Institution and Doctrine of Holy Communion (London: John Murray, 1901).

¹⁹ From Logic and Life (1883), cited in Ramsey, 45.