

# More than generous

A talk given by Rev Robert Cotton  
At Holy Trinity Church  
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On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1833 John Keble preached his famous influential Assize Sermon in the University Church of Oxford. In later years, this became regarded as the start of the Oxford Movement, a dynamic process that re-connected the Church of England in a lively way with the “catholic tradition”. The Church had over some years slowly drifted into being a rather protestant, and very English enclave, which had become somewhat compromised by its close association with parliament, the aristocracy and a limited range of English society. By becoming more ‘catholic’ over the next 50 years, the Church of England developed into being more true to itself and what any Church is meant to be. This was not a zero-sum game, though it may have felt so at the time. There were riots, lawsuits and some clergy were deposed; but, essentially, as the Church became more catholic it did not become less true to its other traditions. There were a number of other revivals and new movements, all of which were held within, and energised, the national Church.

The process of becoming more true to oneself is a familiar one in parish life. When a new curate arrives, she or he brings talents and enthusiasm that find space within, and enliven, the current congregation. As the curate leaves, ideally the parish has learnt new ways of being faithful, while still remaining within its traditions – and a similar process has happened with the curate’s own ministry. This process was articulated during the main debate about Women Bishops recently in the General Synod most powerfully by Sister Rosemary: “I practice mystical prayer; I revere the Sacraments; I pray to Mary and the Saints; I am a traditional Catholic; I want Women bishops and I am staying within the Church of England!”

But it is possible to push a tradition too far. Anyone familiar with family life will know how the incessant “why? why? why?” of a toddler can be replaced with a niggling ‘pushing of the boundaries’ by a teenager. The mature adult knows that these processes must be accommodated with the needs and wishes of other family members. If one person chooses not to hold back his/her own demands, this individual is forcing the family into a zero-sum situation: either I win and you lose, or I go (and you lose). So it was with the Oxford Movement. John Newman eventually decided that his questioning would take him out of the Church of England into the Church of Rome. Today, some have made the same choice; some will go soon; but many will stay. As they do, they owe themselves as well as the family of the Church of England an answer to the question: why are you staying?

The decisions taken this month at General Synod were not a casting out of the traditional catholics; the Church of England stood firm and declared clearly that it hopes traditional catholics will remain in this part of God’s family. The situation will be helped if those on the edge can describe *why* they want to remain (and not merely *that* they are reluctant to leave). People on all sides are now claiming the title “loyal Anglicans” which means that there is a danger that this phrase, like the words ‘orthodox’ and ‘biblical’, begins to be used as a weapon against others (in other words, if I am a ‘loyal Anglican’, it implies that my opponent is not). Any group claiming the title owes the church an explanation of how they contribute

to the Church of England, and how they enable other traditions to be more themselves. Otherwise they can be seen merely to be guarding their own territory.

The process of the historical reception of the Oxford Movement into the common life of the Church of England worked in a similar way 4 centuries earlier with the Reformation. By being brought back to our biblical origins, the Church of England was revitalised and became more true to itself. Appreciation of these 2 great periods in our history has led the Church of England to be called 'Catholic and Reformed'. But it is easy with only 2 such adjectives to see all groups within the Church as lying somewhere along a line between reformers and Catholics. The majority of people and parishes within the Church of England, who do not want to be characterised by only one of these words, can then be thought of as being a soggy compromised mess in the middle. But there is a third tradition within the Church of England - seldom named, so easily forgotten - that has guided and inspired the church of this country for hundreds of years. This I call the Kingdom tradition.

Those who focus on the Kingdom want to see our society, at all levels and in many ways, increasingly moulded on the teaching and example of Jesus. Kingdom-seekers have been prophetic (abolition of the slave trade), educational (church schools), diaconal (often working in secular charities), and institutional (acting as chaplains to public servants). The Catholic tradition reminds us that the Church is the instrument of God; the Reformed that the individual's heart is the home of God; and the Kingdom that a transformed society is the desire of God. At best these traditions flourish when informing, challenging and learning from each other. So, for example, the 'Fresh Expressions' initiative recently has brought new life to the Church of England, and now is itself learning from Kingdom seekers what needs to happen so that its ideals can enter the bloodstream of Church and nation. Or, another example from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: many radical parish priests were personally rooted in the Catholic tradition with a public ministry that was Kingdom focused. So traditions flourish best when rubbing alongside each other. That is what is felt to be so challenging to the "traditional Catholics" who, by demanding a separate space within the Church of England, are having to hear that these demands damage themselves, and are making our Church's witness to the nation implausible.

At July's meeting the General Synod proclaimed a positive and whole hearted 'yes' to the Catholic tradition, wanting it as an integral part of the Church of England. If, however, members of that tradition remain standing on a ledge, ready to jump, that will only damage themselves and the church. Equally, the General Synod gently, kindly and firmly said 'no' to all sorts of possibilities that would keep one of its treasured traditions out on a limb - such arrangements would create the zero-sum game in which everyone, in the end, loses. In the months ahead, generosity will continue to be shown to the Catholic tradition; but generosity alone is insufficient and inappropriate, as it misses the nature of the current situation, which requires the integration, rather than the balancing, of various traditions. It is relatively easy, but in the end patronising, to be generous to an acerbic elderly relative, if he/she only visits on Christmas Day. What is needed in the Church of England now is more than generosity - we need *insight* to recognise the arrangements which will enable every tradition both to contribute to, and to receive from, the whole; we need *courage* to accept how we are appreciated by others, especially if that does not match our own self image.

What began with the Assize Sermon has come full circle. The Church of England has flourished because of the Oxford Movement. Now, the Catholic tradition will be more true to itself by being welcomed, challenged and appreciated by those from the Reformed and the Kingdom traditions.