

What is Anglo-Catholicism? A Response in Six Parts

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Part One: The Oxford Movement

Our 1993 Parish Profile remarked that "Ascension, a parish rich in history, is spiritually and liturgically Anglo-Catholic by tradition and teaching." But what does it mean to be Anglo-Catholic? This article is the first of several in which I seek to explore this aspect of our parish identity.

The Tractarians

As an identifiable movement within modern Anglicanism, Anglo-Catholicism originated among a group of scholarly priests at Oxford University in the 1830s. The three best-known leaders of "the Oxford Movement" were John Keble, John Henry Newman, and Edward Pusey.

The movement started in 1833 when, as a protest against Parliament's political interference in the internal affairs of the Church of England, Keble preached a sermon on "National Apostasy" in the University Church of Saint Mary the Virgin.

Soon after this, Keble, Newman, Pusey, and others started publishing a series of pamphlets known as Tracts for the Times. The members of the movement thus became known as the "Tractarians."

Competing Views of the Church

The central question initially addressed by the Oxford Movement had to do with the nature of the Church. In early nineteenth century England, people tended to view the Church in one of two ways.

The first view saw the Church of England as "the nation at prayer." In this view, the Church had no existence independent of the nation; it was simply the spiritual side of civic society. As an institution, it was thus seen as a sort of "Department of State for Religious Affairs." The primary purpose of the Church in this view was not so much to offer eternal salvation as to improve the quality of national life by teaching morals, sponsoring good works, and cultivating public virtue.

A very different view, associated with the Evangelical Movement, saw the Church as an essentially invisible society made up of all those who had made a personal decision to accept Christ. Individual believers might join earthly institutions called "churches," but these bodies would also include many nominal members who had not yet come to faith and who thus remained outside the "true" Church. So, in the Evangelical view, the Church was an invisible worldwide spiritual fellowship that could not be identified with or limited to any visible earthly institution.

The Tractarian Vision

The great achievement of the Oxford Movement was to recover a third view, solidly rooted in Scripture and the early Church Fathers, which sees the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church as the visible divine society founded by Christ himself to carry forth his mission on earth until the end of time.

The Tractarians emphasized that Christ gave authority in the Church to the apostles and their successors, the bishops. An essential mark of the Catholic Church is thus the presence of the threefold orders of bishop, priest, and deacon in apostolic succession.

The Catholic Church is to be found in its fullness in those historic denominations which have maintained the apostolic succession and which have adhered to the faith of the ancient Creeds and Councils. By this criterion, the three great "branches" of the one Catholic Church are the Anglican, Roman, and Orthodox Communions.

One enters the Church through Holy Baptism, and is subsequently fed by Christ himself in the Sacraments. Thus, faith is not the cause but rather the fruit of one's Christian identity and Church membership. Yet all Christians are called to holiness of life through the spiritual disciplines of regular worship, reception of the Sacraments, and prayer.

The Vision Today

Such was the vision that sparked a fire of theological, spiritual, and liturgical renewal across large parts of the Anglican world from the 1830s to the present day. It is the same vision that inspired Fr. Raymond Rogers and his successors here at Ascension.

Although our situation today is very different from that of early 19th century England, we are even now being offered new versions of the same old competing views of the Church that were on offer then.

Some would still have us treat the Church as an institution of our own creation, ours to do with as we see fit, according to the world's ever-changing standards.

Others would still have us retreat into a narrowly individualistic piety, in which an undue emphasis on subjective religious experience eclipses the proper role of Church and Sacraments in the Christian life.

In such times, the Tractarians still offer us a vision of our place as Anglicans in the wider Catholic Church, a vision of wholeness and integrity, that we can ill afford to ignore.

Part Two: The Revival of Ritual

Our style of worship at Ascension is often described as "high-church" or "catholic." Our Sunday Mass features vestments, incense, and bells, with worshippers genuflecting and making the sign of the cross.

Sometimes, Roman Catholic visitors remark how similar our service is to theirs (or at least to how theirs used to be!). But our style of worship is not simply an imitation of Roman practices. Rather, our Anglo-Catholic liturgy has its own history and tradition. Where, then, did this tradition come from and how did it develop?

Our worship did not always look the way it does now. If you were to attend an Anglican parish church two hundred years ago, you would probably find a service consisting of Morning Prayer and Litany. The officiant would wear no vestments other than a simple black gown. The high point of the service would be the sermon, which might go on for as long as an hour.

If, on the other hand, you were there one of the four Sundays a year when the Holy Communion was celebrated, the liturgy would look very different from what we're used to today. The priest, in white surplice, academic hood, and black scarf, would celebrate from the north end of the Holy Table, with a complete absence of any ceremonial gestures.

The church building itself would be very plain, with no stained glass, pictures, or statues (except perhaps for monuments to departed parishioners). As if to emphasize the centrality of the sermon, the church interior would be dominated by an enormous pulpit, which would dwarf the small wooden Holy Table and other sanctuary furnishings.

In the 1830s, the leaders of the Oxford Movement (see Part One of this series in last month's issue) made no moves to change this style of Anglican worship. Yet their teachings in the Tracts for the Times exalted the Church's liturgy and sacraments as true means of grace by which worshippers could experience the beauty of holiness and be brought into God's life-transforming presence. So, as their students left university and took up posts in parish churches, they began to seek forms of worship expressive of the Movement's sacramental theology.

These early Anglo-Catholics gradually discovered just the style of worship they were looking for when they went back, before the Reformation, to the Church of the patristic and medieval eras. In the 1840s, the Cambridge Camden Society began promoting the construction of churches in the English gothic style. These richly decorated churches placed the high altar in the dominant position to emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Anglo-Catholic priests—who became known as "Ritualists"—gradually re-introduced many pre-Reformation customs and practices into their parishes. Altars were adorned with crosses, candles, and frontals. Priests started wearing chasubles. The Eucharist was celebrated at least every Sunday, and, in some places, daily. At the beginning of services, vested choirs processed into the church led by cross and torches. Incense, bells, and holy water came back into use. The Blessed Sacrament was reserved in an aumbry or tabernacle for the Communion of the Sick. The practice of sacramental confession was revived. Prayers for the dead and invocations of the Saints were restored to public worship.

The parishes that pioneered this revival of ritual were often located in the urban slums of Industrial Revolution England. During the week, the Ritualist slum priests ministered heroically to the poor of their parishes amidst conditions of unbelievable squalor. Then, on Sunday, their Liturgy brought a splash of color, warmth, and pageantry—as well as a glimpse of God's Kingdom—into lives that were otherwise harsh, cold, and drab.

Any change tends to provoke opposition, of course, and the Ritualist Revival proved no exception. Many feared that the Ritualists were subverting the Anglican Church with their "popery." In several London parishes, such as St. Barnabas, Pimlico, rioting mobs disrupted services. Bishops continually issued directives to try to curb what they saw as Ritualist excesses. In the 1870's, the Protestant Church Association initiated a series of prosecutions which resulted in several Ritualist priests being sent to jail for alleged violations of the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer! By the beginning of the 20th century, however, it was clear that Catholic worship and devotion had gained a secure place in Anglican life.

At Ascension, we are heirs to the legacy of the 19th century Ritualists and, through them, to the liturgy and worship of the ancient Church. For we believe that the same God who took flesh and came among us in Jesus Christ still reaches out to us continually through sacramental signs and symbols. Let us take care to cherish, preserve, and pass on this rich heritage.

Part Three: The Religious Life

The great genius of the Oxford Movement (see Part One of this series) was that it did not remain a movement of scholarly opinion confined to the university, but was able to carry its theological and doctrinal insights over into a profound and far-reaching renewal of the liturgical, musical, artistic, pastoral, and spiritual dimensions of church life. Nowhere are the consequences of this renewal more apparent than in the revival of the religious life within Anglicanism.

The term "religious life" describes a state of consecration to God involving vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Communities of monks or nuns have existed since the

earliest centuries of Christianity. In the Middle Ages, groups of similar communities were organized into religious orders, such as the Benedictines, Carmelites, Cistercians, Franciscans, and Dominicans.

The Religious Life in England

In the 1530s, Henry VIII suppressed the religious orders in England, seizing monasteries and convents, with their vast estates, for the Crown. Subsequently, from the sixteenth century until the nineteenth century, there were no real communities of monks or nuns in the Church of England.

From its inception, however, the Oxford Movement called Anglicans to the pursuit of holiness. And one feature of genuine movements of Christian renewal is that, sooner or later, they inspire some of their adherents to seek to give up everything in order to follow the Lord. The Oxford Movement proved no exception.

The Anglo-Catholic Sisterhoods

The revival of the religious life in the Church of England began in 1841, when Marion Hughes took life vows before Edward Pusey, one of the Oxford Movement's primary leaders. Then, in 1845 Priscilla Sellon founded the Park Village West Sisterhood in London.

Similar sisterhoods quickly sprang up in a number of places in England and North America. Their work often involved nursing. In areas of great deprivation, and at great risk to themselves, the sisters cared for those suffering from such diseases as diphtheria, typhus, and scarlet fever. For spiritual sustenance in these harsh conditions, the sisters recited the ancient monastic offices, and, beginning with the Society of Saint Margaret in 1856, instituted the first daily celebrations of the Holy Eucharist in the Church of England since the Reformation.

Anglican Sisterhoods also emerged in the United States, under the leadership of Bishop Charles Grafton among others. Today, their tradition is continued in the religious life of the Community of Saint Mary (near us at Peekskill on the Hudson) and also at All Saints Convent, Catonsville, Maryland, to name just two places.

Men's Religious Communities

The establishment of men's religious communities took another twenty years. In 1865, Richard Meux Benson founded the Society of Saint John the Evangelist in the Oxford suburb of Cowley. The order, known as the "Cowley Fathers," established houses in India, North America, and South Africa. One of Benson's initial partners at Cowley was a young American, Charles Grafton, who later became Bishop of Fond du Lac in Wisconsin.

In 1884, another American priest, James O.S. Huntington, took life vows in the presence of Bishop Henry C. Potter of New York, thus founding the Order of the Holy Cross. The community grew and, in 1900, moved to its present location on the banks of the Hudson River at West Park.

Notable men's communities in England include two orders founded in the 1890s: the Community of the Resurrection, founded by Charles Gore, which since 1898 has operated its seminary at Mirfield in Yorkshire; and the Society of the Sacred Mission, which for many years operated a seminary for financially disadvantaged students at Kelham Hall.

Finally, in the early twentieth century, Anglican versions of the Benedictine and Franciscan orders came into being. Both have maintained successful communities in England and North America.

Religious Communities and the Parish

At first glance, all this monastic endeavor may seem a step removed from the spiritual struggles of ordinary parishioners in the pews. But the opposite is true. Apart from their continual intercessory prayer for the Church and the world, as well as ministries to the poor, sick, and aged, Anglican religious communities have offered practical assistance to parish churches in at least three ways:

First, in retreats and quiet days for parish groups and individuals, usually given at the community's retreat house, and often conducted by members of the community;

Second, in preaching missions and schools of prayer given in parishes by visiting members of religious communities;

Third, in spiritual direction offered by members of religious communities to lay people and clergy on an individual basis.

So, in gratitude to God for the revival of the religious life in Anglicanism, we should pray daily for our religious communities, and for the increase of their vocations.

Part Four: The American Connection

Most histories of Anglo-Catholicism concentrate on the Church of England, and pay little attention to the movement's progress in the United States. The story of American Anglo-Catholicism is, however, our story, and merits particular attention in this series.

The High-Church Tradition

Before the Oxford Movement began its work in England in the 1830s, there was already a vigorous "high-church" party active across the Atlantic in the young Episcopal Church in the United States.

During the American Revolution, the future of Anglicanism in the new nation had been very much in doubt. To many, the desire for worship according to the Book of Common Prayer in a church governed by bishops seemed inseparable from loyalty to the British Crown. Bishops in particular were regarded as part of the old system of aristocracy that had no place in the new American Republic.

In the Thirteen Colonies, Anglicans had simply been those who were loyal to the Church of England. Once forced to go their own way, however, American Episcopalians found it necessary to articulate the theological and doctrinal reasons for their distinctive system of worship and church order.

In the newly formed Episcopal Church, "high-church" and "low-church" parties emerged, each emphasizing different elements of the Anglican heritage. The low-church party emphasized evangelical preaching aimed at producing adult conversions. The high-church party emphasized the sacraments and the apostolic succession.

Where the low-church party stressed the similarities between the Episcopal Church and Protestant denominations, the high-church party stressed the differences. Thus, many Episcopalians found the high-church position attractive because it offered the most persuasive justification for the continued existence of a separate Episcopal Church in America after the Revolution had severed ties with the Church of England. Early American high-church bishops included Samuel Seabury, John Henry Hobart, and Jackson Kemper.

American Influence on the Tractarians

In 1823, John Henry Hobart, the high-church Bishop of New York, visited Oxford, where he made a positive impression on the future Tractarian leaders John Keble and John Henry Newman. Years later, Newman pointed to the Episcopal Church as vindicating the Oxford Movement's principles.

Unlike the Church of England, the Episcopal Church was prospering and growing in America without any official connection to or support from the state. So, Newman argued, the very existence of the Episcopal Church proved the Oxford Movement's main point: the Church of England, as seen reflected in her American daughter, was not a department of state, but a true branch of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. And bishops, as seen in America, were not civic officials deriving their authority from the Crown, but true successors of the apostles deriving their authority from Christ himself.

Anglo-Catholicism in America

During the 1830s the Tracts for the Times were republished in the United States, winning cautious approval from the high-church party, and vigorous denunciation from the low-church party. Then, in the 1840s, a new generation of Anglo-Catholics began to emerge. Under the influence of the Oxford Movement, they went much further on many points than the older high-churchmen, whom they called "high and dry."

For all their emphasis on the apostolic succession, the old high-churchmen still regarded themselves as Protestants, and were staunchly anti-Roman in their attitudes. But the younger generation of Anglo-Catholics came to regard the Protestant Reformation as a destructive aberration, a "de-formation" as they called it, that had obscured Anglicanism's essential continuity with early and medieval Christianity. In order to restore this continuity to plain view, they began to revive many pre-Reformation practices such as private confession, invocation of the Saints, prayers for the dead, and monastic celibacy.

General Seminary in New York City became an early center of such Anglo-Catholic influence. In 1844 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church was forced to initiate an investigation into allegations of "Romish" practices among students and faculty there.

Also, in the 1840's, James Lloyd Breck and several companions founded a semi-monastic community in the wilds of the Wisconsin Territory. Their aim was to establish a base for missions and a school for training locally-recruited candidates for the priesthood. The community evolved into Nashotah House, which eventually became the seminary most closely associated with the Catholic movement in the Episcopal Church.

This emerging Anglo-Catholicism provoked fierce opposition which only intensified when, after the Civil War, Ritualist practices—genuflections, signs of the cross, vestments, incense, bells, etc.—came more and more into use. Repeated attempts were made at the General Convention to pass legislation aimed at curbing these "excesses." A majority of dioceses refused to ratify the election of the Anglo-Catholic leader James DeKoven as Bishop of Wisconsin in 1874, and as Bishop of Illinois in 1875.

But such setbacks proved temporary. In 1888, Charles Grafton was elected Bishop of Fond du Lac in Wisconsin. In 1866, during an extended stay in England, Grafton had been one of the founding members of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, also known as the Cowley Fathers, the first Anglican religious order for men since the Reformation. Later, from 1872 until 1888, he was Rector of the Church of the Advent in Boston. Grafton's consecration in 1889 as the second Bishop of Fond du Lac brought an Anglo-Catholic of impeccable credentials into the ranks of the American episcopate.

In 1900, Grafton found himself at the center of controversy when he presided at the consecration of R.H. Weller as Bishop Coadjutor of Fond du Lac. A number of bishops from

neighboring dioceses took part in the service. Also in attendance, at Grafton's invitation, was Tikhon, the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. After the service, the bishops went outside to pose for a picture. For the first time ever, bishops of the Episcopal Church were photographed wearing copes and mitres. The picture, which became known as "the Fond du Lac Circus," was widely published in church publications, causing heated controversy.

Nonetheless, it was clear by this time that Anglo-Catholicism had gained a secure foothold in a cluster of midwestern dioceses, which became known as the "biretta belt," as well as in hundreds of parishes all over the country. Prominent Anglo-Catholic parishes on the East Coast included the Church of the Advent, Boston; St. Mary the Virgin, New York City; S. Clement's, Philadelphia; Mount Calvary, Baltimore; and St. Paul's, K Street, Washington D.C.

Part Five: Liturgical Trends in the 20th Century

So far, in this series, we have concentrated on the origins and development of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism in the nineteenth century. In this article, we look at the several distinct styles of Anglo-Catholic worship, church decoration, and spirituality that emerged in this past century.

Prayer-Book Catholicism

One approach to being Anglo-Catholic was the cultivation of an "Olde English" style of worship. Anglo-Catholics were widely suspected of disloyalty to Anglican principles. So, some sought to demonstrate that Catholic worship was entirely compatible with loyal conformity to the Book of Common Prayer.

These "Prayer Book Catholics" set about researching and reconstructing late medieval English (or "Sarum") ceremonial, vestments, and church decoration. A typical "Sarum Rite" parish might have an altar with a cross and two candlesticks, framed by a cloth dossal and two side curtains. Services would follow the Prayer Book strictly, with congregational singing of English plainsong Mass settings. The clergy would wear full-cut gothic vestments or long, flowing surplices.

The style of worship that Fr. Rogers brought here to Ascension in the 1940s seems to have been inspired mainly by this Prayer Book Catholic tradition (with a few other influences blended in). Photographs of the new church taken after its completion in 1949 resemble textbook illustrations of the "Sarum" style of church decoration.

The Missal Tradition

In the early years of this century, however, not all Anglo-Catholics were happy to go this route. The Prayer Book Catholics were trying to achieve a uniquely English "look," totally distinct from the florid Roman Catholicism of the era. But it was also a time when many Catholic-minded Anglicans were tempted to "go over" to Rome. So, for sound pastoral reasons, many clergy wanted to show that everything the Roman Church had to offer could also be found within Anglicanism.

In place of neo-gothic, adherents of this approach went in for baroque and rococo altars and church furnishings. Clergy used the Anglican Missal instead of the Book of Common Prayer, and wore Roman-style vestments such as "fiddleback" chasubles, birettas, and short cottas richly trimmed with lace. Church services incorporated popular Roman devotions like the Rosary and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Liturgical Renewal

From the 1930's on, a third approach, known as "the Parish Communion Movement," or "the Liturgical Movement," started to gain influence. This school sought to reach back beyond both Prayer Book and Missal to recover the liturgical ethos and practices of early Christianity.

Arguing that much Anglo-Catholicism had reduced the congregation to the role of passive spectators, advocates of "the Parish Communion" sought to increase lay participation in worship. They advocated such reforms as celebration facing the people, congregational (as opposed to choral) singing of the Mass, the simplification of ceremonial, and the revision of liturgies to bring them more into line with ancient Christian patterns.

In the Episcopal Church, the 1979 Prayer Book fulfilled many of the goals of the Liturgical Movement. Many Anglo-Catholics welcomed the 1979 book as containing elements they had long sought, such as prayers for the dead, and a form for sacramental confession. But others viewed the new Prayer Book with suspicion, and lamented what seemed to them a loss of dignity and beauty in the language of worship.

Liturgical renewal came to Ascension in stages. Fr. Reed prepared the way by ably guiding the parish through the period of "trial liturgies" resulting in the transition to the 1979 Prayer Book. In the early 1980s, Fr. Moyer's remodeling of the sanctuary, controversial as it was at the time, embodied many of the Liturgical Movement's central ideals. Ever since, the Church of the Ascension has been an exponent of that liturgical style known as "Rite II Anglo-Catholicism."

Future Directions

In the 1990's, some of those who had earlier embraced and promoted liturgical renewal began to have second thoughts. A number of thoughtful critics observed that many of the new ways have tended to focus the congregation's attention on itself, thus making the liturgy more a human-centered "celebration of community" than a God-directed offering of worship. Perhaps our task for the future, then, is to cultivate a style of Anglo-Catholic liturgy that preserves the undisputed gains of liturgical renewal while also recovering something of that sense of awe and wonder at God's majesty so much more evident in the earlier traditions.

Part Six: Conclusion

With this article, we conclude our series exploring Anglo-Catholic identity. Since our position is often described as "high-church," we can summarize some of the essentials of Anglo-Catholic spirituality in the following nine "high" views:

1. A High View of God. Anglo-Catholic worship at its best cultivates a sense of reverence, awe, and mystery in the presence of the Holy One before whom even the angels in heaven veil their faces.
2. A High View of Creation. At the same time, we delight in the beauty of God's creation. The Anglo-Catholic view of the world is highly sacramental, seeing signs of God's presence and goodness everywhere in the things that he has made. In worship, we gather up the best of creation—as reflected in art, craftsmanship, music, song, flowers, incense, etc.—and offer it all back up to God.

3. A High View of the Incarnation. Our salvation began when Christ took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God became man in order to transform human existence through participation in his divine life. The Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas expresses the Anglo-Catholic vision perfectly:

"O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ..."

4. A High View of the Atonement. An authentic Anglo-Catholicism looks not only to Christ's Incarnation but also to his Sacrifice. The image of Jesus on the cross reminds us of the depth and horror of human sin, and of the price that God has paid for our redemption. Anglo-Catholic spirituality entails a lifelong process of turning from sin and towards God. Many Anglo-Catholics find the Sacrament of Penance an indispensable aid in this process.
5. A High View of the Church. We come to share in the divine life of the risen and ascended Christ by being incorporated through Baptism into his Body, the Church. Thus, we regard the universal Church neither as an institution of merely human origin, nor as a voluntary association of individual believers, but as a wonderful mystery, a divine society, a supernatural organism, whose life flows to its members from its head, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.
6. A High View of the Communion of Saints. The Church, moreover, consists not only of all Christians now alive on earth (the Church Militant), but also of the Faithful Departed, who continue to grow in the knowledge and love of God (the Church Expectant), and of the Saints in Heaven, who have reached their journey's end (the Church Triumphant). We have fellowship with all who live in Christ. Anglo-Catholicism thus affirms the legitimacy of praying for the dead, and of asking the Saints in Heaven for their prayers.
7. A High View of the Sacraments. We believe that Jesus Christ really and truly communicates his life, presence, and grace to us in the Seven Sacraments, thus enabling us to give our lives to God and our neighbor in faith, hope, and love. Holy Baptism establishes our identity once for all as children of God and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven (although we can by our own free choice repudiate this inheritance). And in the Holy Eucharist, Christ becomes objectively present in the Blessed Sacrament of His Body and Blood. Eucharistic adoration is thus an integral component of Anglo-Catholic spirituality and devotion.
8. A High View of Holy Orders. Since the days of the Oxford Movement, Anglo-Catholicism has borne witness that the threefold ministry of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons in Apostolic Succession is God-given. The validity of our sacraments, and the fullness of our participation in the life of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, depend upon our faithful stewardship of this divine gift. For this reason, innovations threatening the authenticity of our apostolic orders must be resisted at all costs.
9. A High View of Anglicanism. We affirm that the Anglican Churches are truly part of Christ's Holy Catholic Church. The prophetic vocation of Anglo-Catholicism has been to bear witness to the catholicity of Anglicanism. Yet it can

be an uncomfortable vocation that requires us to take unpopular stands against developments that threaten this catholicity. Since the days of the Oxford Movement, our standard has been the faith and practice of the ancient, undivided Church. Our vocation as Anglo-Catholics remains one of holding ourselves, and our Anglican institutions, accountable to the higher authority of the universal Church.