

Historic Episcopate—Another (once underground) Voice

Colleagues:

MeLinda Morton studied theology at Seminex in the early 1980s. After seminary she went into the Air Force and served as an operational AF officer for ten years: “I did some flying, served as a Minuteman II missile officer, and spent my last three years in the space program.” Her Minuteman II service, she says, were “years secreted underground in command of enough nuclear missiles to blow the earth off its axis.” Sounds like Apocalypse Now.

Ordained thereafter, MeLinda has served as ELCA Interim Pastor in smallish congregations. Currently she’s at one near the Texas – New Mexico border. In, with, and under all of this she’s been involved in two graduate programs. One is law, the secular kind, with her J.D. degree coming next month. Second is a doctoral program in systematic theology at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, to which she’ll return when she has her law degree in hand. Talk about credentials! One doctorate in Law and one (I hope) in Gospel.

Somewhere along the line MeLinda bumped into ThTh and wrote last week to re-connect & to say thanks. In our subsequent exchange, she asked my opinion on “Called to Common Mission [CCM],” the Lutheran revision of the Lutheran-Episcopalian “Concordat.” That Concordat didn’t garner enough votes to pass at the 1997 ELCA general assembly, and it seems that the CCM revision has not pacified the critics either. It’ll be up for a vote at the next assembly later this year. Some ELCA bishops wish it would all just go away, but of course it won’t.

Even efforts by veteran Episcopal dialogist and Concordat author, J. Robert Wright, in Lutheran publications—DIALOG (Winter 1999) and LUTHERAN PARTNERS (March/April 1999)—do not palliate the perturbed. In a whimsical parenthetical line Wright puts his finger, I think, on the deep background beneath the dilemma, the truth behind the trauma. He says: “After all, there are probably as many different definitions of the historic episcopate among Episcopalians as I have encountered definitions of justification among Lutherans!” If neither side has consensus within its own ranks for the gift it claims to bring, what does full communion amount to? What do numbers mean regardless of which way the vote goes?

Back to MeLinda. Well, I didn’t have anything “new” on the CCM to pass on to her, so I pulled up ThTh 17 (Sept. 10, 1998) and sent that. Its title: “The Historic Episcopate [HE] and Justification by Faith Alone [JBFA].” Should you wish to see it, GO TO the Crossings web page www.crossings.org

After reading ThTh 17, here’s what MeLinda wrote back:

Dear Prof. Schroeder:

Thank you for your kind response. I paid enough attention during my days at Seminex to fairly well predict your theological critique. I have considered at length the HE as it relates to “order” within the institutional church; in particular matters such as you raise [when you say] the following:

7. “Episcopoi” as overseers—even in the NT usages of that term—are misread, I think, when we link them to what the word “bishop” has become in today’s church, also in our ELCA. Nowadays it regularly signals a “legal” (I’m not saying legalistic) magisterium of some sort, an “authority over”

congregations, doctrine, pastors, policies, finances, etc. Thus it's already suspect ala JBFA hermeneutics. Why? Because the law, whether canon law, even God's law—by definition—can never “guarantee” the Gospel.

So the question becomes; What then is the function of this “legal” ecclesial ordering? By what positivist amenity does it commend itself to application? Does it operate in some effective manner to stay hands of evil; to assure, if not grace, then justice?

The institution of church does, most surely, employ law; and rightly so. The church is not immune from the necessity of “ordering.” The issue of course is the relationship between that “ordering” for the sake of the institution and the proclamation of Gospel which is essential to the very existence of church; the boundary of the former seems appropriately set by the free expression of the latter.

So we return again to the question; Does the ordering exercised in the application of HE operate in some effective manner to stay hands of evil; to assure, if not grace, then justice?

I think we misstep by overextending our specifically historical reflections of HE. Whatever nostalgic comfort we may obtain from surveys of early church structure or Euro/Swedish ecclesial systems, such examples are significantly abstracted from the contemporary institutional environment.

Perhaps the real questions here are not questions of cozy heritage and sturdy orthodoxy, but of power.

I appreciate the vision that sees “apostolic succession [as] missionary continuity, not the passing on of magisterial management.” However, our contemporary hierarchical expressions

of church leadership reveal little of this risky missionary zeal. To the contrary, it is the sad reality of our particular contemporary expression of church that, even sparse hierarchical ordering has become ineptly applied, organizationally detached, rigid, and institutionally self-serving. (Growing numbers of rural congregations suffer without regular pastoral care, theological education is ill-funded, regionalism inhibits service and collegiality.)

I am concerned that the legal expansion of this tidy hierarchical system will further a growing institutional oppression of those fragile locales, those horridly ambiguous places of suffering, in which we are called to extend the grace of God to all humankind.

MeLinda