



mundi medicina

the newsletter of Holy Cross Monastery

Vol. Two, No. 1

Winter/Spring 1990

Church Identity and Our Benedictine Roots

by

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*How does the Episcopal
Church understand itself
in relation to society and
to other denominations?*

During the past year I have read a number of books and articles discussing the problem of the boundaries of the church as a community of faith. Boundaries here mean that self-understanding which the Christian community has of itself in relation to that which is outside those boundaries. In the psychology of individuals this boundary is called self-differentiation or identity.

The authors of these books and articles articulate a growing concern over the way the church understands itself in relation to the society which surrounds it. This is the question being raised: *Is the Christian community in this period of history able to speak about itself with the clarity necessary for self-differentiation?* More to the point, how does the Episcopal Church understand itself in relation to society and to other denominations?

But to pose the question in a different way: We claim inclusiveness as a high value in the Episcopal Church, yet what is this thing into which we seek to include a great diversity of persons? What is the boundary around these people that differentiates them from other people?

These are important questions, because unless we can understand ourselves in relation to society we cannot carry out our mission of service. Institutions like the church which do not have clarity about their identity are troubled by role confusion, the blurring of responsibilities among the various orders of ministry. There is also a tendency to try to shore up the boundary by making rigid pronouncements, or by the enunciation of definitions which tend to become barriers to inclusiveness.

It needs to be said that such institutional identities are not subject to invention. They are part of a corporate self-understanding which is not always consciously articulated. An identity, to be part of the corporate consciousness, needs to be discovered, claimed, and celebrated. When this is done the identity becomes the glue which holds the institution together and allows its members to function together.

The elements making up a church identity, whether of a congregation or a denomination, are found in the accrued self-awareness coming out of its history, helping it to maintain a sense of continuity. They are also discovered in what might be called competency, those things which are done well, and are a source of pride to the membership. All of this gives the church a sense of moving forward, building energy to carry out its mission.

In looking for these elements of identity, one place I have found it very helpful to look is to the Benedictine roots of Anglicanism. Our church owes

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much of its character and its style to the Benedictines sent to England in the late sixth century by Gregory the Great.

The Anglican Communion had its beginnings through the missionary work of St. Augustine and his fellow Benedictine monks. Benedictine monasticism spread north and east from Canterbury in southeast England. Gradually the previously existing Celtic, and the transplanted Roman, traditions were brought together. But the union had a definite Benedictine way about it.

Benedictine monks staffed the cathedral of Canterbury for nearly one thousand years. And along with Augustine, the first archbishop, Benedictine monks such as Odo, Dunstan, Alphege, Lanfranc, Theobald and Anselm provided archiepiscopal leadership. By the year 1200 there existed well over three hundred monasteries connected to the Benedictine tradition, and half the cathedrals in England were under Benedictine rule. This monastic heritage shaped the English church, and this style still exists within our Anglican self-understanding.

Following the Union Jack, the Church of England gradually spread throughout the world, growing into an increasing number of national churches which make up the Anglican Communion. Note that we do not usually call ourselves the Anglican Church. Rather, we understand ourselves as a communion of national churches united through such things as our relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference of bishops, prayer books and what we might call an Anglican style.

As Anglicanism has spread around the world into many cultures its diver-

sity has increased. At the recent Lambeth Conference the proceedings were simultaneously translated into six languages! Such diversity is a blessing marking our true catholicity. But it also tends toward a loosening of the bonds which unite us.

The time is ripe for us to look back to our Benedictine heritage as a way of reclaiming an identity and self-understanding. We are not, for example, a confessional church, but a church which expresses its theology in worship. We are known for doing our liturgy with great care and dignity, emphasizing the transcendent. This is the style of Benedictines.

We have emphasized prayer and spirituality. And, at the heart of our devotional life are the Prayer Book Offices, Morning and Evening Prayer. These were adopted directly out of the *Opus Dei* the daily rhythms of the Benedictine office.

Also, is not our emphasis on the *via media* rooted in Benedictine concern for moderation and balance? And does not our love of Incarnational theology come from the Benedictine understanding of the relationship between prayer and work—the inseparability of spirituality and the rest of life?

The list could go on. What I want to suggest is that it would be a worthwhile exercise to explore these Benedictine roots, seeking to rediscover some of the sources of our Anglican self-understanding. Who knows—we might find those elements of identity which give us an inclusive boundary, and a new energy to carry out God's call to mission.

Editor's Note: This article is the first in a series of three, which will investigate the Benedictine heritage of

the Anglican Communion and Anglican monasticism. The series will provide the lead articles of the three issues of MUNDI MEDICINA this year.

AHC Notes

—Fr. Douglas Brown, OHC
Director

I am writing in the pages of *Mundi Medicina* to wish you all a very profitable Lent and a joyous Easter. It seems to me that as we celebrate the central events of God's acts of redemption we have a wonderful opportunity to move, by self-examination and intensified prayer, into a more real relationship with ourselves and with God—one based on an acknowledgement of real strengths and weaknesses, a real perception of the need for God's mercy, and a real sense of thankfulness for his gifts and love. So often these are acknowledged and accepted on principle rather than by personal application. But the Paschal Mystery calls us to an ever deeper grounding in what is true for all, but accepted individually from within the truth of our own lives.

I am happy to report that over 250 Associates sent in reports for 1989—a record! And I want to take this opportunity to give you an update on the list of Associates as found in the *Intercession Book*. Several entries were inadvertently omitted from diocesan listings and the others are recently received in the AHC.

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