



Episcopal Traditions and Customs
Essays by Dr. Stephen Donald Palmer

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Sainthood

Sainthood is fuzzy. We toss the word around a lot but—who are, or were, the saints?

It depends upon whom you ask. St. Paul (a charter member) referred to all believers as saints of the church. In the New Testament, the word is used only in the plural, for all Christians. (The designation didn't keep them from being severely chastised by St. Paul, however.) No one was singled out for a special type of sainthood, for such things as martyrdom, exceptional holiness, or having performed miracles.

After Paul's inclusivity, the Church began to be more selective. During the first millennium of the Christian era, saints were named by popular accord. Then the ranks began closing because the Church sought to identify individuals who deserved especial veneration. The Roman Catholic Church recognized that the custom had gotten out of hand. Then the process of canonization was instituted. Following specific criteria and thorough investigation, certain individuals were first "beatified", as a preliminary step, then canonized as saints. The performance of miracles was a prominent requirement.

In 1969 the Roman church sought again to reform their church calendar. Too many saints, too little known about some of them. Many saints were dropped because of lack of credibility. This included St. Christopher, participant in the beautiful legend of his having carried the Christchild (hence the name, "Christ-bearer"). St. Valentine was dropped; legend had three Valentines, at least two of whom were beheaded, but little else was known about them.

Canonization is a tedious process, which the late Pope abbreviated upon occasion. John Paul II canonized 300 saints... more than any of his predecessors had done. Now the hagiography of the Roman church—the calendar of saints—has 10,000 saints, or saints-in-process. There are even 700 whose name begins with "A"!

Our Episcopal church calendar recognizes only 15 saints, all mentioned in the Bible. That's surprising, St. Francis is out, along with St. Augustine, St. Anthony, St. Vincent and a lot of our other friends. (Our calendar refers to "Francis, Friar of Assisi". He's a saint to me.) On the other hand, The Rev. Albert Kennington of Mobile, in his splendid "The Episcopal Church: A Primer for Believers", is a follower of St. Paul. "Generally, any Christian, specifically, the heroes of the church remembered on special days."

Why Saints? The Church, it is maintained, does not pray to saints, but prays with them. C.S. Lewis finds that distinction a bit fuzzy. The difference is important, however. Hagiolatry is the worship of saints. We don't do that. We venerate; we don't worship. Some ask saints to intercede for them; others find this unpalatable. So the term lacks consistency and clarity. St. Stephen, whose namesake I am, is still "Saint" to me. We may use the term as we choose, somewhat. I am reminded of a pure gold quotation:

"Why were the saints saints? Because they were cheerful when it was difficult to be cheerful; patient when it was difficult to be patient. And because they pushed on when they wanted to stand still, and kept silent when they wanted to talk. And because they were agreeable when they wanted to be disagreeable. that was all. It was quite simple, and always will be."

The Lectionaries

Lectionaries are lists of scriptural texts (lections) which are for use in worship. They had their beginning in the 4th Century, with the assignment of certain texts to specific days in the Church year. The Roman Catholic Church developed a Lectionary in 1969, revised in 1981, which provides for a three-year cycle of differing lections, so that at the end of three years the worshipper will have heard (and meditated upon) a large amount of New Testament, and somewhat less of the Old Testament, also called the Hebrew Bible. In the newest lectionary, which we will be discussing, 3991 New Testament verses will be read out of the 7959 total number in the New Testament. Half. When John Paul II was pope, and following Vatican II, the Roman church developed a revised lectionary, with much change from the previous lectionary.

The Common Lectionary (pages 889–931 of the Book of Common Prayer), published in 1983, is an ecumenical project (as opposed to a solo Roman church publication) of several American and Canadian denominations and others, developed out of a proper concern for the unity of Christ's church and a desire for a common experience in hearing and in studying Scripture.

Next, the Revised Common Lectionary was published in 1992. This revision is based upon the Common Lectionary, taking into account constructive criticism which had been solicited and accepted. It is the product of the Consultation on Common Texts, which comprises about 20 denominations, with representatives from the Episcopal Church, the Lutherans, the Anglican Church in Canada, the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodists, Presbyterians, and others. The Revised Common Lectionary has a few new features, outstanding among which is the presence of readings concerning women and their roles in salvation history. Many of these texts have not been read in churches before. Another new feature is having two sets of Old Testament lessons.

A major value of the Revised Common Lectionary is its ecumenical posture. This new lectionary will be used widely by most Protestant denominations and widely in the Anglican Communion. The Roman church and the Lutherans have adopted it with some variations. The Unitarian-Universalists have adopted it, and many other denominations, some of which are listed above. Objection has been raised because of the cost, and the concern by some that we're not ready for this yet. The Episcopal House of Bishops decided last June that the Revised Common Lectionary "shall be the lectionary of this church.



How the Episcopal Flag was Created

It is 1918 and the Diocese of Long Island was going to celebrate its 50th anniversary. Bishop Frederick Burgess, the second Bishop of Long Island, asked William Baldwin, a lay member of the Cathedral Chapter, to head a committee planning the occasion. Baldwin planned a great procession, through the grounds of the cathedral (there's that word again) and even arranged with heraldic experts to design colorful banners to be carried. What pomp! There was a diocesan banner, one for each of the three archdeaconries, 20 for diocesan societies, and one for each parish and mission. A total of 170 banners, described by an observer as "fine and picturesque."

There was no banner, no flag, for the Episcopal Church. The national church had never made one, never conceived of a design. The Diocese of Long Island persuaded the next General Convention to establish a commission for the purpose and Mr. Baldwin was appointed its secretary.

Mr. Baldwin presented his proposed flag at the next General Convention, but it was too small to be exhibited. He was asked to (quickly) make a larger, full-size one. Story has it that he went shopping in Kansas City (convention site) and purchased some "Turkey red" cotton, some pale blue material, a crib sheet, scissors, needles and thread. The Dean of the Kansas City Cathedral, the Very Rev. Hubert Wood, and Mr. Baldwin stayed up late that night in a hotel room and made a full-size proposed Episcopal Church flag.

Mr. Baldwin declined a request from the National Cathedral that he give them the proposed flag that he had made, to be put in the church archives. Instead, he gave it to his own diocese. He made a flag from another crib sheet for the archives. When William Baldwin died, his flag fittingly draped his coffin.

Mr. Baldwin described the flag's symbolism thus: "The red cross is the oldest symbol, dating back to the third century. The white represents purity and the red, the blood of the martyrs. The blue is ecclesiastical blue, light in color and used in the clothing of the Blessed Virgin Mary and, on this flag, represents the human nature of our Lord which he got from his virgin mother. The nine cross crosslets or Jerusalem crosses represent the nine dioceses that convened in Philadelphia in 1789, when the Constitution of the Protestant Episcopal Church was adopted. . . The nine cross crosslets are set in the form of a St. Andrew's cross in memory of the fact that, to avoid swearing allegiance to the British Crown, Bishop-elect Seabury of Connecticut (the first bishop of the Episcopal Church) had to go to Scotland to be consecrated by Scottish bishops." The large red vertical-horizontal cross, St. George's cross, is in recognition of St. George, the patron saint of England, as Andrew is of Scotland.

Mr. Baldwin delivered the striking Episcopal flag to the General Convention about 1923. This remarkable church of ours adopted it 17 years later, in 1940.

The Sacraments

The Episcopal Church recognizes seven sacraments, of which only two—Baptism and Holy Eucharist, the great sacraments—referred to as “sacraments of the Gospel” and “dominical sacraments” because they were instituted by Our Lord Himself (Dominus). They are “essential” to the church, according to the Lambeth Quadrilateral.

Digress. In 1888, at the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops, and following by a couple of years a meeting in Chicago of the Episcopal Bishops, there was adopted a four-pronged statement, the Lambeth Quadrilateral. It said that the essential requirements of the church are (1) Holy Scriptures as containing all things necessary for salvation; (2) the Apostles’ Creed as the baptismal statement and the Nicene Creed as a sufficient statement of the Church’s faith; (3) the two sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and (4) the historic episcopate as a symbol of the unity of the church. (See the Book of Common Prayer, pp 876, 878)

Baptism is from the Greek word meaning to dip in water. Obviously, rituals involving water, even water to purify, have been present in many traditions for centuries. The Jews of Jesus’ day used baptism to initiate the Gentiles converts. John the Baptist, that great man, used baptism as a sign of repentance. Water has enormous and irreplaceable significance in our lives. It is essential for life, beginning in the womb.

Next—what is a sacrament? In the way-back days of catechisms, we learned to say, and never to forget, that a sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”. Jesus took common water, vital water, and gave it new meaning, as the way to initiate candidates into his discipleship. The application of water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is essential for Christian baptism.

In Baptism we are born anew, into God’s family, the Church. The candidate is cleansed of Original Sin, and the parents and godparents—and the entire congregation—receive the person as a member of the Christian community and promise to teach and support him. Some denominations restrict baptism to adults, with the reasoning that a baby cannot make these promises himself. We, on the other hand, believe that infants and children are appropriate candidates. The New Testament records the baptism of adults and “their household”.

Early on, of course, immersion was the practice. We really don’t know how we came more customarily to baptize by pouring (not sprinkling) water on the candidate’s head. By the fourth century, however, pouring water was the norm. Baptism by immersion is done upon request in the Episcopal Church and of course is itself the standard in many other Protestant denominations and Orthodox churches. Since water is a sign, only, the volume of water would seem less important.

Episcopal Church Hymns

The hymns sung in the Episcopal Church are rich and varied (but vide infra). Each has a story, none perhaps more stirring than the tale of the composition of “Amazing Grace”, which was composed in deep penitence by John Newton, a slaver, who was converted while reading Thomas a Kempis’s “The Imitation of Christ”. Newton left his slave trading and his dissolute, rebellious life, became an ardent abolitionist, and was ordained to the priesthood. Newton and the poet William Cowper wrote many hymns, published as the Olney Hymns. Another of Newton’s hymns is “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken”. The Episcopal Church included “Amazing Grace” in the “new hymnal” of 1982; 200 years after it was written.

John Greenleaf Whittier, our beloved American poet, wrote the exquisite and beloved “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, Forgive Our Foolish Ways”.

Every Navy man—as well as the rest of the world—is stirred by the majestic and foreboding of “Eternal Father Strong to Save”. The tune was written especially for this hymn and named “Melita”, which is an archaic word for Malta, where Paul was shipwrecked. Other branches of the service—naval aviation, the Navy Seabees, the Marines, the Merchant Marine, Coast Guard, Navy nurses, submariners and divers—and others, including Arctic and Antarctic service—have added their own verses. In an interesting anachronism, the version sung in the movie “Titanic” is the 1940 Episcopal version; the Titanic sank in 1912.

“Ein Feste Burg”, “A Mighty Fortress is my God”, was written and set to music by Martin Luther. It has been translated from the German, but, interestingly, the tune fits both the German and English words.

The lilting “Lord of All Hopefulness” was written by the English woman Jan Struther, who was the original “Mrs. Miniver”, which was somewhat autobiographical. (Greer Garson played the title role in the movie.) Jan Struther’s publications and activities helped persuade the United States to join her country, England, in World War II. Her efforts were commended both by Roosevelt and Churchill. A lady of remarkable talent, she remained a committed agnostic, despite the thoughts expressed so well in her hymn.

Mrs. Lesbia Scott wrote the hymn we all love to sing, “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God”. In tribute to her hymn, and as a bit of a critique of our hymnody, an author wrote: “I’m an Episcopalian. The music we sing during our services is nicely sophisticate: some Anglican chant, some Bach, a bit of Purcell, and many hymns recently written in a spare, modern or postmodern style. I love the piety, the purity, and the craftsmanship of these hymns, but I’m disappointed that there isn’t much that’s just plain fun to sing. Every time I’ve sung this piece (“I Sing a Song of the Saints of God”) in church, I’ve been amazed at the change that takes place among the congregation. Since the words are so unexpected and so delightful, everyone seems to follow the meaning of each line.”

Did you know that several Afro-American spirituals are in the hymnal? They are from the heart, naked of any embellishment, un-fancy, sincere. Try “Go Tell It on the Mountain”—#99.

There are many beautiful hymns we don’t have, too. I remember in particular, “Nearer my God to Thee”, reputedly sung by the band on the Titanic when it was sinking. . . We have new ones, too, like “They Cast Their Nets in Galilee” by William Alexander Percy. And no fewer than 11 contributions by Waring McCrady, who was the young son of the Vice Chancellor at Sewanee when I was a student.

The Cross

The Episcopal Church is a church with an altar, and upon that altar is a cross; rarely, a crucifix, much more commonly an “empty” post-Resurrection cross. This seems to bother some other Protestants. (I use the term “Protestant” advisedly. Are we Protestant or Catholic? More on that down the road.) Central Park Baptist Church in Birmingham was building a new edifice (with something of an “edifice complex”). The architect put a cross atop the spire, and was scolded. “We don’t put crosses on our churches.” “Hmmp. What do you want me to put there, a bathtub?”

By contrast, when Elaine and I moved here from Sylacauga, and left behind many meaningful years in Alpine Baptist Church, we gave them a large wooden cross, exquisitely made for the occasion by one of the congregation, a master woodworker. Delight! Several told us how much it added, high on what might be called a rood beam, and many openly wondered why they’d never had a cross in the church before.

We cherish the significance of the cross. We acknowledge the Christ and him crucified. It is a sign of deep reverence, and not, as some far-out Protestants have said, an idolatrous gesture. We acknowledge the cross on the altar in several ways. Many will, when passing in front of the cross, face it, hesitate, and gently bow the head. Generally, we acknowledge with a slight bow the processional cross when it passes our pew. Some members genuflect as they enter or leave their pews by the center aisle, a deep bend on the knee. (genu, Latin for knee; flectere, to bend).

For centuries, Christians have been making the sign of the cross upon themselves, usually touching the forehead with the thumb and first two fingers, then touching the abdomen, the left shoulder, and then the right shoulder. When is it appropriate? Whenever you feel like it! Often one silently says, “In the name God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.” I usually, at those times, recall the stirring words of the hymn, “I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity.” The priest makes the sign upon himself at the Confession.

It is customary among some Episcopalians to make the sign of the cross upon their bodies when the priest, with hand upraised, makes the sign of the cross upon the congregation at the Absolution following the Confession. The celebrant at the Eucharist makes the sign of the cross with his thumb upon his forehead first, his lips, and the Gospel Book as he commences to read the Word in the Gospel.

Other applications of the sign of the cross include upon candidates’ foreheads at baptism, when the clergyman says, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Making the sign of the cross is never directed or specified. It is an ancient custom going back to the second century. It should not be construed, ever, as “too Catholic”. No less a Protestant than Martin Luther himself commended this personal act of piety.

I quote from a great Lutheran pastor, Paul Bosch. He says it well, very well. “But remember, it’s heavy stuff. That personal signing of yourself with the cross, it’s nothing you want to do lightly. You’re marking your very self, your body, your psyche, with the cross of Christ’s suffering.”

There are neither prescriptions nor proscriptions for making the sign of the cross upon oneself. Do it if it feels meaningful to you. Not for anybody else, just for you.

Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion

Our Vicar's sermons are neither tedious nor bland. Consequently, few of us have had the opportunity to examine The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 867-876. In my younger (and even more irresponsible) years I had many opportunities to peruse the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, albeit more in a desultory than in a focused examination, during church services.

They are interesting and important—and 450 years old. They were largely written by that memorable man, Thomas Cranmer, who was Archbishop of Canterbury for 23 years, 1533 to 1556. What a man he was! Cranmer is conceded to have been a powerful author of the English Reformation and instrumental in founding the Church of England. Politics being far nastier then than now, his labors in reformation were followed by his arrest and trial for treason under the Roman Catholic Queen of England, respectfully known as “Bloody Mary”. He was tried, condemned, and forced to recant. Just before his execution, however, he retracted his forced recantation, thrust his hand—with which he wrote the recantation—into the fire, saying, “This hath offended.”

The Articles are the historical doctrinal standard for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. Cranmer drew up the Articles as his last major accomplishment to the development of Anglicanism. The Articles were suppressed throughout the Roman Catholic rule of the Church in England, but under Queen Elizabeth the Great and her Parliament they were adopted.

They have been described as moderate, biblical, “winsome”, inclusive of the positions of Reformation theology. Their importance, their dictates, as it were, are viewed with differing reactions. The evangelical (we want to talk more about that word sometime) and the AngloCatholic wings of the Episcopal Church and its offshoots, though differing considerably among themselves, tend to portray them as written in stone—which indeed they are at the “Traditional Protestant Episcopal Church” in Point Clear, a schismatic Episcopal offshoot. The *via media*, the moderates in the Church, tend to consider them a venerated, invaluable, but dated historical document. We can learn much from them.

Several Articles pointedly deny various Roman Catholic doctrines, such as transubstantiation, the sacrifice of the Mass, and works of supererogation—works done for God that are more than those required and hence “money in the bank” for one's future judgmental needs. The Articles specifically allow the administration of the Sacrament “in both kinds”, wine and bread, to laity and clergy alike, thus breaking with Roman tradition.

The Articles are firmly Protestant in affirming the final authority of government over the temporal aspects of the church—but not the spiritual. They defend and describe the necessity for ordination of the clergy, the legitimacy of official oaths, and the doctrine that Christ did indeed descend into Hell.

Winsome? See Article XXII: “The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration as well as Images as of Relics and also the Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.”

Rereading of the 39 articles is an effectual reminder that the Church is historical, is alive, and is not anchored in time by fixated ideas and ancient winsome terminology.

Episcopal Vestments

Vestments for the clergy came into use about the 4th century. The point is well taken that Jesus the Christ wore no chasuble, mitre, or even a stole. Not a bad lesson to keep in mind. They are accoutrements, symbols, beautiful and meaningful. They are not the essence.

We learn best from our mistakes and from our children. Many years ago my 16 year old daughter and I were headed to church at St. Luke's in Mountain Brook. A big and a good church, but a bit high falutin'. Anne wore a peasant dress and sandals. (Gasp!) Of course, I wore a suit and bowtie (my trademark). I sniffed a bit, and started to suggest to Anne that a peasant dress and sandals were hardly the proper attire for St. Luke's in Mountain Brook. Then a bolt of lightning hit me, right out of the clear sky. If Jesus wore shoes at all, he wore sandals. I'd better keep my big mouth shut. I quickly glanced heavenward, hoping that my thoughts hadn't been overheard.

Prior to the 4th century, long flowing robes were sort of the norm for everybody. However, as the mode of dress changed, the church didn't. (Sound familiar?) That's how we got started with ecclesiastical vestments. The cassock, a long black garment worn under everything else, resembles the attire of those days. Over the black cassock can be worn a surplice, a long but not so long white vestment with full sleeves. Its history is interesting. The name comes from the Latin meaning a garment worn over furs. In the Middle Ages, with no central heat, monks were accustomed to wearing fur garments. These were covered by a white robe. (The cotta is a comparable, smaller white garment worn by acolytes and organists. Latin for "coat".)

The stole. It's a long scarf of fabric matching the color of the church season. It symbolizes ordination, representing the yoke of Christ. A deacon wears it over his left shoulder, crossing to the right side, where it is tied or fastened, thus being worn diagonally. Priests wear it over both shoulders. It came into use in the 4th century. A black "tippet" is the equivalent of the stole, and is worn during services which do not include the Eucharist, such as Morning and Evening Prayer.

The alb is an all-white vestment (alb-white) which is ankle length with long sleeves. It is worn by clergy during the Eucharist. Generally, the stole is worn over it, and is anchored at the waist with a cincture (from the Latin word for girdle.) Cinctures are white ropes. They snug the alb (or the cassock) to the waist. They are knotted in such a fashion that the stole is also secured by the cincture. I've watched our vicar make the knots, but I can't quite figure it out.

The chasuble (from the Latin, "little house") is a vestment made of silk, perhaps matching the color of the church calendar. It is oval, large, and sleeveless, with an opening in the center for the priest's head. The priest may put this on immediately before the beginning of the Holy Communion itself.

Bishops—some bishops—wear mitres. These are the distinguishing marks of the episcopate, the bishops. It is a tall, double-pointed hat (and I quote) "probably of Oriental origin, which can be traced back to pagan times. Something similar was worn by the kings of Persia and Assyria long before the Christian era." It came into ecclesiastical use about 1100. The two points of this double pointed hat have come to represent the Old and the New Testaments.

The mitre is elective. Some bishops wear them; others do not. Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter, Bishop of Alabama when Elaine and Jane were confirmed, was so large and tall that he couldn't have cleared a doorway, had he worn one. Point of interest.

A rabat is a vest-like garment covering the chest, to which is affixed a clerical collar. (Erroneously sometimes called a Roman collar.)

These are the major vestments we encounter here in St. Paul's. From time-immemorial uniforms or such attire have been worn by selected people—judges, policemen, rulers, clergy. A major purpose is to remind the clergy of that eternal admonition; "Remember who you are and whom you represent."

Orders of Ordained Ministers in the Episcopal Church

There are three orders of ordained ministers in the Episcopal Church: bishops, priests, and deacons. Nothing new there. In curiosity, let's look a bit farther.

Bishop. That word, and the word "episcopal", both come from the Greek "epi", over, and "scopos", to see. The overseer. (Overseeing, not overlooking!) Priest. From the Latin "prester", elder, and "presbyter", old man. (I didn't say that.)

Deacon. Now there's a word for us, and a history richer than is generally known. From the Greek diakonia, to serve. As the church in the earliest days was rapidly growing among both Hebrews and Greeks, the Greeks complained that the Greek widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. (Early Mid East crisis.) The twelve Apostles said (Acts 6:2, NRSV) that they "shouldn't neglect the word of God to wait on tables." So they asked the disciples to select seven men "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom",.... "while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and serving the word." Thus were the first deacons chosen, among whom the first was Stephen, later to be martyred. They were ordained by the Apostles by the laying on of hands. This was the earliest ordained order of ministry.

Diakonia—service—is central to Christianity. Christ said, "I am among you as one who serves." Not a bad role model. The early deacons served, first at tables, in order to ensure just distribution of food, and then they served generally the community of believers. For the next several centuries, as Christianity spread, the diaconate flourished. They oversaw the church's social service. They served as the eyes and ears for the bishops, through making known the concerns of the community. Deacons had roles in the liturgy, including assisting in the administration of communion, and led the first "confirmation classes", which then lasted for three years of preparation.

Although for most the diaconate was lifelong, increasingly deacons became priests (presbyters), and even bishops. Gradually, the role of deacon became almost altogether transitional—simply a stepping stone, perhaps a probationary period, prior to entering the priesthood. The vocational deacon faded from existence. Even the concept of diakonia, or service, withered, to be kept alive mostly in the religious orders. The most notable champion of diakonia was Francis of Assisi, who remained a deacon during his life as a friar.

The concept of minimization of the diaconate is even revealed in our 1928 Book of Common Prayer, in which the service of ordination of deacons refers to it as "an inferior office."

The Lutherans rebirthed the importance of the servant ministry, but we've gotten hard at work on it. There has been a "phenomenal resurgence" in the order of deacons, one of the three "full and equal orders of the ministry". The deacon stands at the edge of the community as a bridge to the world, "and shows Christ's people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself." Many work in hospitals, prisons and other institutions; some work directly with bishops; many participate in the liturgy. This differs from simply a transitional stage. Many are choosing it as a permanent vocation.

There are schools for deacons, training earnest candidates to interpret to the church the needs of the world, and to restore the early church's understanding of diakonia. The servant ministry.

The Catechism in the Episcopal Church

Catechize—to teach orally, in a question and answer structure. Catechumen—the student, who is being catechized by the catechist. The Catechism, in the Book of Common Prayer, pp843-862, is a statement of belief of the Episcopal Church. A Catechism—a book of questions and answers about religion—was first used about 500 years ago in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549. The Book of Common Prayer has gone through several revisions. We currently use the revision written in 1979. Prior to that, the revision used was promulgated in 1928, and prior to that, 1892, with several revisions since the first Prayer Book appeared in 1549. With the revisions, have come opportunities to rewrite, to revise previous editions. The current Catechism is significantly different from the one we had to memorize. Bully for you.

Let's look a bit at a few of the highlights. First, a statement of mission: (p.844) "This catechism is primarily intended for use by parish priests, deacons, and lay catechists, to give an outline for instruction. It is a commentary on the creeds, but is not meant to be a complete statement of belief and practice; rather, it is a point of departure for the teacher, and it is cast in the traditional question and answer form for ease of reference. The second use of this catechism is to provide a brief summary of the Church's teaching for an inquiring stranger who picks up a Prayer Book."

Next (p.844) we deal with human nature and sin, beginning with the powerful: "What are we by nature?" "We are part of God's creation, made in the image of God." "What does it mean to be created in the image of God?" "It means that we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with God."

On the identity of God the Father (p.846): "..... In that there is one God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." (Note the comma after 'is'. We don't pause here as we should in saying the creed.) "What does this mean about human life?" "It means that all people are worthy of respect and honor, because all are created in the image of God and all can respond to the love of God."

The Ten Commandments (p.847) ".....were given to define our relationship with God and our neighbor." And sin "is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation."

On Jesus: (p.849) "What is the nature of God revealed in Jesus?" "God is love." "Why did he take our human nature?" (p.840) "The divine Son became human so that in him human beings might be adopted as children of God and be made heirs of God's kingdom." On the New Commandment (p.851), a step up from the old "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." "The New Commandment is that we love one another as Christ loved us." On the Holy Spirit, (p.852) "How do we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives?" "When we confess Jesus Christ as God and are brought into love and harmony with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation."

The Church (p.854) is described as "...the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head and of which all baptized persons are members." The Eucharist (859) "...is the way by which the sacrifice of Christ is made present, and in which he invites us to his one offering of himself."

The Rt. Rev. C. C. J. Carpenter, 70 years ago, was affectionately known as the "Big Bishop". He was an imposing giant of a man, soft spoken with resonating tones, a man of God. His advice to all of us then-young folks was: "Remember who you are, and whom you represent." Amen. That's almost a summary of the Catechism.

The Episcopal Altar Guild

In the early days of the Church, believers gathered in private homes to celebrate their communion, to break bread together and share their memories and thoughts of the Christ and his sacrifice. The head of the household, as host of the gathering, provided the meeting place and the meal. The Church grew rapidly and larger places were needed. People within the groups were given the responsibility of arranging for the meetings, for the care of the meeting place, and even the vessels of the holy meal. Commonly the worshipers themselves provided the bread and the wine. A family or group within each “congregation” assumed leadership. This was the state of the church by the 4th century.

During the following centuries, certain leaders, called clerics, and, later, sacristans, were given these responsibilities. They were actually lesser orders of the ministry. The sacristan supervised the sacristy, the room in which Communion vessels and vestments were kept..

Years later, laymen became sacristans and in the late 19th century women were asked (or did they initiate the request?) to assist the sacristans. Very soon they became sacristans. During the 20th century this ministry organized into what were known as altar guilds. They have provided the quiet, beautiful, reliable leadership in this special ministry now for many years. Indeed, until about 1970 this was the only opportunity that women had for serving in the sanctuary.

In increasing numbers men are becoming members of altar guilds. Often husband and wife (or, better, wife and husband) couples are members.

We non-members of the altar guild have a rather superficial appreciation of their duties. When we come to the altar, everything is in order, sacred, beautiful. It may not occur to us to wonder how things got that way! With some variations among the parishes, altar guilds have these duties: The care of Communion vessels, care of the candles and candelabra, care of the vases and, often, provision and arrangement of the flowers on the altar. They may participate in the care of vestments. Often altar guilds make altar hangings. Supplies of bread and wine are their responsibility. Careful washing (and stain removal!) of the fair linen and purificators used in the services.

The Communion vessels are placed on the altar prior to each service—just so. The acolyte invariably finds everything in its perfect place. The dramatic stripping of the altar on Maundy Thursday, in preparation for Good Friday, is a holy task shared with the priests. Add to these regular services the special ones, including weddings, baptisms, funerals, and other special occasions.

The Altar Guild is a ministry, a calling. Quietly, devotedly, reverently, reliably the members prepare the sanctuary for us, as we worship the Risen Christ.

An Altar Guild prayer eloquently expresses their commitment: “Almighty God, grant we beseech thee, that we may handle holy things with reverence, and perform our work with such faithfulness and devotion that it may rise with acceptance before thee and obtain thy blessing; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Anglican Communion

The Anglican Communion is a worldwide brotherhood of churches. (I can't bring myself to be politically correct and say "worldwide personhood" or "worldwide brother and/or sisterhood"). Until the early 1900s most Anglican churches were found in countries over which the British flag had flown, and witnessed to the missionary zeal of the Church of England. As time passed, the success of the far-flung Church of England branches brought the realization that its very size made it a structure which would best be served by a policy that each country or region would have its own autonomous church. There is no written agreement or constitution other than loyalty to the principles declared in the several Books of Common Prayer of the individual churches, based upon the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England. There are great comfort, camaraderie, vision, and fellowship in this great community of believers.

The Anglican Communion is made up of 38 independent, self-governing regional and national churches ("provinces") and includes 70 million members, representing 64,000 congregations in 164 countries. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the head of the Church of England, and the spiritual leader of the Anglican Churches in the Communion. He has legal authority only over the Church of England, but the power of his leadership is enormous. He is "first among equals", "primus inter pares". The leaders of the many provinces are referred to as the "primates".

Every ten years the 450 Anglican diocesan bishops all over the world meet in Lambeth Palace, the See of the Archbishop of Canterbury. ("See" is kin to the word "seat"). The word "cathedral" is from the Latin word for "chair". The late and beloved Rt. Rev. C. C. J. Carpenter, the "big bishop", who confirmed Elaine, traveled the entire state in his car, for many years. He commented that his cathedral was the front seat of his car, since that's where his seat was much of the time.) Resolutions adopted at the Lambeth Conferences have great teaching authority, but are not binding.

At the 1930 Lambeth Conference a definition of the Anglican Communion was adopted which acknowledges it as a fellowship dedicated to upholding the (Holy) Catholic and Apostolic faith and order, bound together not by a central legislative or executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained by the common counsel of the bishops.

Church polity differs among the constituent members with many provinces being much more of a hierocracy, dominated by the bishops, than our Episcopal Church, with its leadership shared by bishops, priests, deacons and the laity.

The concept of being "in communion" with other members of the Anglican Communion has been described as more of a mood than a theology. From the Web: "If an Anglican church is a member of the Anglican Communion, it is said to be in communion".

The actions of our last General Convention, which were legally done and are within the autonomous structure of the Episcopal Church, have brought statements by some of the other provinces that they are in "impaired communion" with us. This means that they disagree. Actually, some have been in impaired communion with us for many years, because we ordain women as priests and bishops. I think this illustrates autonomy within fellowship.

We must do what we believe to be true to the faith, our own and the faith of the church.

Rogation Days

Rogation Days are an ancient custom which has been being observed since the 5th century. Rogation—to ask, as in “interrogate”—we ask God’s blessing of the harvest, of the earth and sea. We remind ourselves that we are the stewards of Creation, neither the authors nor the owners of it. Originally an agricultural observance, it has been broadened and made more inclusive—the crops, the catch of the sea, the fruits of our labors in all their aspects.

An ancient pagan custom was “beating the bounds”, with a procession walking out the boundary lines of the village and marking the bounds with stakes. Sticks of willow and birch were used to strike the stakes; hence, “beating the bounds”. Subsequently the custom became incorporated into Rogation Days celebration, particularly in England, in which the parishes are clearly defined, contiguous with adjacent parishes. Rogation Day was celebrated by walking the boundaries of the parish and acknowledging in this way our tangible stewardship.

As the countries, including our own, became more industrialized and less agrarian, we have seen a lessening of the celebration of Rogation—and we are the worse for it. Our “new” Episcopal Book of Common Prayer of 1979 sneakily de-emphasized Rogation Days and Rogation Sunday, as they were annotated in the 1928 BCP. They are privileged times to celebrate stewardship, to remind ourselves of our roles, not as masters or owners, but as stewards.

Job had to be reminded of that, too. Remember the voice from the whirlwind? “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? When the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

Rogation Days are to honor God for His creation, and to pray for the land and sea and the gifts of labor, and for the needs of all. The traditional Rogation Days are the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Day. Rogation Sunday is the Sixth Sunday after Easter. Great music is in our hymnal for celebrating Rogation.

St. Francis, in his “Canticle of Brother Sun”, wrote: “May thou be praised, my Lord, for our sister, mother earth, who sustains and governs and produces fruits with colored flowers and green plants.”

A humbler bit of poetry was in a book I had as a young child, “Daddy Dofunny’s Wisdom Jingles.” Daddy Dofunny was an old and very wise black man on the farm. He wrote, “Some prays for rain, and some for shine, and sometimes bof’ together. But I prays for sunshine in my heart, and then fergits the weather.”

“Almighty God, whose loving hand hath given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Liturgical Movement

I guess this article could be sub-headed “Liturgical Movement” Not “the” nor “a” liturgical movement, just about body language during church services. We have already discussed the reintroduction of the ancient kiss of peace. In our observance of this we should—I think—keep the greeting simple (“The Peace of the Lord”, “Peace be with you” or some such), and avoid discussion of Saturday night football or coiffure appraisals. The most frequent concern and admonition about the observation is that too much of a good thing disrupts the spiritual continuity of the service.

We customarily honor—not worship, but honor—the cross, as it passes us in the processional, and as we pass in front of the altar. Certain denominations are persuaded that this is idolatry, though nothing could be farther from the truth.

Another ancient tradition is making the sign of the cross on oneself on certain occasions. Many make the sign of the cross—forehead, left chest, right chest, mid chest, or right chest, left chest—just before or during the receiving of the Eucharist and upon other occasions. The celebrant makes the sign of the cross during certain moments of the Eucharist. Very commonly, congregants cross themselves during the absolution of our sins, and at the benediction, paralleling the words “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, when the priest makes the sign of the cross upon the congregation.

Time to interject a comment before we read further. These are customs of the Church. They, nor any other things, are not compulsory or ordered. Never.

An ancient tradition is genuflection, dropping on one knee to kneel before entering the pew. It is a brief acknowledgement of the altar and of where and who we are. Straight from the Latin: genu, knee; flectere, to bend.

Even when there is no processional hymn, and indeed when there is no processional, it is appropriate to stand when clergy enter the nave. During the infrequent but meaningful services without a processional, standing upon entry of the clergy is customary.

A fairly recent tradition involves taking the Gospel Book into the nave to read the day’s Gospel. This clearly signifies taking the Gospel to the people. In spirit, it parallels the current Roman custom of holding the service in the vernacular—the language of the people—instead of Latin, as had been the practice for centuries.

Some Priests leave the sanctuary and kneel at the altar rail during the General Confession. That prompts a fleeting recall of church architecture. The main part, seating the congregants, is the nave, corresponding to a boat. Some churches, like St. Michael and All Angels in Anniston, carry the boat motif splendidly to the ceiling, where one can easily image the ribs of a boat’s hull. The sanctuary is the space inside the altar rail.

The Episcopal Church and now, inconsistently, the Roman Catholic, administer the communion “in both kinds”, the bread and the wine, to all communicants. We use a chalice, as a common cup for drinking or for intinction, dipping the wafer into the wine. The chalice bearers are assisted, gratefully, if the communicant will guide the cup with a couple of fingers at the base, or a couple of fingers at the base and another touching the bowl.

One tradition, not rigorous, is that “we stand for praise, sit for instruction, and kneel for prayer.” The psalm has often been said while standing; the current custom is, frequently, to sit.

While in the church, we should actively be quiet, with minimal and hushed greetings to one another before the service. Many use the few minutes before the service as a time for spiritual meditation, and find it distracting if others are too audible. Small matter, important matter.

There is even a specified order for lighting and extinguishing the candelabra and the eucharistic candles at the altar. Problem is, it varies from place to place! Hardly an issue!

Liturgical movement. Body language in the church.

The Eucharist

The Eucharist is the principal act of Christian worship on the Lord's Day in the Episcopal Church. (BCP p.13) It commemorates the Last Supper and follows the Biblical injunction, "Do this in remembrance of Me." As Bishop Wilson says, "It is a memorial act—not merely calling something up to memory, but identifying ourselves with the thing that was done."

The Eucharist is only one of several names given to this sacrament: Lord's Supper, Mass, Holy Communion, and Holy Liturgy being some of the others. Eucharist is the Greek word meaning thanksgiving.

The Eucharist has two major divisions: the liturgy of the Word, with Bible reading, preaching, confession, and ending with passing the Peace; and the liturgy of the Eucharist, in which the bread and wine are offered and blessed, the bread is eaten and the wine is drunk, and we make our communion.

Holy Communion is said to be "of two kinds", i.e., bread, representing the Body, and wine, representing the Blood of Christ. We partake of both kinds, although either is sufficient by itself.

Some priests symbolically have water poured over their fingertips to cleanse them prior to the Communion. The vessel is called the lavabo, from the Latin word for washing.

The bread is kept in a ciborium, on the small table or shelf by the altar (the credence) along with the cruets of water and wine. From this box of bread a sufficient number of wafers is placed upon the paten, the small plate carried by the priest to those making their communion.

Unleavened bread is traditional, although not at all universal. There is one large wafer of the cracker-like unleavened bread; this is called the Host, and the priest symbolically holds it high and breaks it. Christ's Body was broken for us.

Preparing for the Communion, the priest is handed, by the acolyte, a cruet of wine, from which he pours into the chalice, the common cup. This is mingled with water prior to administration.

Communion using the chalice as a common cup is of ancient origin. After a communicant sips the wine, the chalice bearer wipes the rim of the chalice with a purificator. There has been no evidence of transmission of illness by the silver cup, but some prefer to intinct rather than to drink from the chalice. This is done by holding the wafer given by the priest, and then, when the chalice is presented, simply dipping the tip of the wafer into the wine and placing it on the tongue.

It is extremely helpful to the chalice bearer if the person making her communion discreetly guides the cup to her lips, perhaps with the fingers of one hand on the bowl of the cup and fingers of the other hand steadying the base of the chalice. As you can imagine, this is of immeasurable assistance when a lady making her Communion is wearing a large Easter hat!

We quietly leave after having received both kinds, allowing another to take our place at the Lord's Table.

The Episcopal Church Year

Many churches observe the “Church Year”. This ancient custom parallels the life of Jesus, beginning with Advent, then His birth; rising to a peak on His glorious Resurrection. We celebrate other events in the short life of Christ and—a month before Christmas—we begin the cycle again. In the Episcopal Church, as in many others, the hangings on the altar, pulpit, and lectern, as well as the stole worn by the clergy, represent the seasons of the church year.

Advent is the beginning of the church year. There are four Sundays in Advent, so it begins about a month before Christmas. This is a “fixed” season; four Sundays before December 25, whatever day of the week that falls on. The Advent color is purple. In church tradition, this is the color of penitence and reflection.

Christmas, a time of great rejoicing. The liturgical color for this day is white. The color remains white through the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. Epiphany commemorates the showing of Jesus to the Gentiles, specifically the Magi, the Wise Men of the Nativity story, who were the first to know of His divinity. The season proclaims Jesus as Savior of the whole world. The first Sunday after Epiphany Sunday marks the baptism of Jesus and the color is often white. For the rest of the Sundays in Epiphany season, green is the color—the universal color of nature, signifying regeneration, hope, and immortality.

The Epiphany season ends on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. In some churches ashes from the previous year’s palm leaves on Palm Sunday are imposed upon the foreheads of believers. Ash Wednesday is 46 days before Easter Day. The color for Ash Wednesday and the rest of Lent is purple for penitence.

Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter Day, is a time of rejoicing. The color can be red, or purple. The beginning of Holy Week. On Good Friday, the altar is stripped of all its colorful hangings, and a purple veil covers the crosses.

Easter Day—white. What else! The highest day of the Christian year. The date for Easter is the Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox on March 21. It can be no earlier than March 22 or later than April 25.

Fifty days after Easter we celebrate Pentecost, commemorating the gift of the Holy Spirit to the whole world. The color for this day is red, signifying the Holy Spirit. (An old name for Pentecost is Whitsunday, so named because many baptisms were done on this day, with the baptismal clothing being white.)

Following Pentecost is Trinity Sunday, with white hangings, and then the long season of Trinity, with green as its color, lasting for about six months and ending on the first Sunday of Advent.

Liturgical colors are not scriptural! They follow custom, not dictate. In the Middle Ages lots of red, yellow, and blue were used, and then in the somber centuries following, the colors were muted. We’re a color-coded church!

Pentecost

“And when the day of Pentecost had come....” Pentecost is a time to ponder, to be grateful for, to recharge our batteries.

Originally an agricultural festival, the Jews subsequently began celebrating Pentecost on the fiftieth day after the Passover. By the time of the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), the festival was exclusively to recognize God’s great gift of Torah, the Law. It is remarkable that the Jewish celebration and the Christian memorial feast both celebrate God’s gifts.

“They were all together in one place..” Then suddenly the sound of a rushing wind, and divided tongues of fire appeared. Thence a tongue of fire rested upon each of them. The Holy Spirit had descended upon the Apostles, commissioning and empowering them to preach Christ, and Him crucified. Peter, to the surrounding crowd: “This Jesus, God raised up and we are all witnesses. Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God made Him both Lord and Messiah.”

There is debate about exactly what happened at Pentecost, whether it is repeatable, or if it was only for that time and in that place. What was the intent of the Apostles speaking in several languages? Quite apparently, one intent was to declare the universality of the Message.

On Pentecost, the altar hangings are red, symbolizing the fire of Pentecost and the fire of the Apostles and early followers, as they were empowered to proclaim the Gospel. Pentecost is for us a day to celebrate and perpetuate the work of God through His Holy Spirit. It is a day of celebration, re-creation, and renewal of purpose, mission, and the work God does through His people.

For something over a century there have been sects and small denominations and isolated churches, whose members seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit, in the manner of the Apostles at Pentecost. In the practice of their faith, they reproduce speaking in tongues (“glossolalia”), and proclaim other gifts from the Holy Spirit (“charismata”), such as prophecy, healing, casting out evil spirits (exorcism), and divination. They are often “slain by the Spirit”, rendered prostrate during their exuberance. These are loosely affiliated as “Pentecostals”. There is no unifying order and no agreed-upon doctrine. Pentecostals are the fastest growing Christian movement in the world, with several hundred million members in the aggregate.

We may sense that the practice of their religion is a bit foreign to us, or different, and so it is. It is of note, though, that a recent Gallup poll of people of several denominations found that the Pentecostals led all in their belief that religion is relevant to daily life; the Episcopalians were at the bottom of the heap.

We have been chastened, and we can learn from our chastening.

The Creeds

There is great wealth in being a creedal church. Our creeds—the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed—are historically validated statements of belief. “Credo”, “I believe”. They have been described as “expository distillations of Scripture”, and go back to the very early days of the Church. We are called upon to witness our faith. The creed is one of the several ways that we do this.

Assertion of belief begins in Scripture; for instance, the Ethiopian, converted by Phillip, exclaims “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” The Apostles’ Creed was formulated very early and has always been used as a statement of faith at Baptism. We don’t know the authorship of the Apostles’ Creed, which is used with only slight variation throughout Christendom.

In Nicea, presently a town in Turkey, a church council formulated a somewhat amplified statement of belief, the Nicene Creed, in 325 AD. We use both creeds, the Nicene Creed in the service of Holy Communion, and the Apostles’ Creed in the Baptismal Office, and in Morning and Evening Prayer.

The creeds’ importance lies in many areas, among them their being a kind of road map of the teachings of the Bible. They respect Christ’s admonition to be witnesses of the faith that is within us. The creeds, by their very history and integrity, protect the Church against heresy. They afford us worshipping Christians comfort and solidarity as we as a body make the creedal statements in His Church. As their history records, they are major tools in Christian education.

There are dissidents. Behind rallying cries of “No creed but Christ” and “No creed but the Bible” are denominations which in a distorted and fearful way look upon the creeds as heavy-handed dogmatism. (The Baptists, a major force in the dissidents, have nevertheless recently adopted a very severe “Faith and Message” which is non-voluntary, and has created a near-schism in their church.) The noncreedal churches fear that creeds violate free faith, contradict voluntarism, subjugate liberty of conscience, etc. One group accuses the creedal churches of elevating the Apostles’ Creed to the 67th, and most important, book of the Bible! We believe their accusations are flawed.

I find great strength and companionship as I recite “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.....” and thus unite with Christians in the past, present, and future.

Church Vestments, Part I

As a consequence of the 16th century Reformation, when the protesting folks pulled away from their spiritual mother, so to speak, they pretty much left their vestments behind. In many Protestant churches today the academic gown alone distinguishes the clergy. In others, the minister simply suits up in his Sunday-go-to-meeting best.

Let's look at what they left—a look at the more common church vestments, their interesting histories and their usage. Vestments are the vestiges of clothing worn pretty much by all gentlemen during that period of time, not particularly distinguishing the clergy from the general public. The Christian clergy hung on to the common garments while the world changed and thus they began to be associated with clergy, liturgy, the church, and sacred symbols.

The alb is worn by clergy and lay ministers. It is an ankle-length, long sleeved vestment which is white; hence the name. It is worn during services at which the Eucharist is celebrated (or, emergently, on the other days when a proper fitting cassock cannot be found!) There may be a hood sewn onto the collar, called the amice, was originally to protect against inclement weather since churches were often roofless. The amice can be a separate vestment. The alb is the successor to the Roman tunic. Since manual labor in an ankle-length white garment is difficult, it is said that the alb came to signify upper class and intellectual men. Fortunately, we have forgiven this association and consider it a symbol of purity.

The alb is secured at the waist by a cincture, a white rope (cotton, usually), or a wideband or sash of silk. The name cincture is from the Latin word for girdle (which it can also be called) and is related to cinching the saddle on a horse as well as to the miserable disease shingles, the rash of which can vaguely resemble a girdle.

Cassocks—the “ordinary” vestment for priests and others. This ankle length vestment is usually black for priests, deacons, and lay folks and purple for bishops. Red for cardinals; hence their name. (Incidentally, “ecclesiastical purple” isn't quite written in stone. For instance, Bishops Duval and Duncan used differing shades of purple.) Cassocks trace their origin to the Gauls and, later, the Romans. Their chief function in earlier days was to provide warmth. Ancient churches were without heat, and often in the open air. Some cassocks were actually lined with sheepskin or fur. Until recent times they were usually woolen. Cassocks have upright collars and some (not ours) have either 33 buttons symbolizing the years of Christ's earthly life, or even 39 representing the 39 Articles of Religion. Cassocks fit tight at the waist. They do. Here at St. Paul's, I wear Oscar Rich's cassock. I noticed. This is the vestment worn at non-Eucharistic times by clergy, lay ministers, and acolytes.

The clergy wear stoles. These are long bands of cloth worn draped over the neck, with each end (often fringed) hanging below the waist. They are commonly in the color of that particular season of the church year. Deacons wear their stoles over their left shoulder, crossing and fastening on the right side. Some clergy are innovative and have other colors and symbols on their stoles. Stoles are symbolic of yokes, and hence, humility.

Priests wear chasubles during the celebration of the Eucharist. It is a large, oval, sleeveless vestment with an opening in the center for the head, thus similar in design to a poncho. You will notice that the Vicar has his chasuble draped over the altar rail, and he dons it before the Eucharist itself. It is a seamless garment and recollects the garment taken from Jesus at the crucifixion.

Well, we've gotten the Vicar and the LEM vested. We'll continue next with Church Vestments, Part II, with the surplice, cotta, mitre and others.

Church Vestments, Part II

When Fr. John was here for Miss Sue's funeral, he checked out the name tag on the surplice I was already wearing. He thought I'd borrowed his surplice. I hadn't. (I think he concluded he'd left his at home.) Why a surplice and not an alb? Recall that the alb is the white (hence the name) full length vestment with long, narrow sleeves, which is worn when the Eucharist is celebrated. The surplice (and its country cousin, the cotta...see later) are worn during other services. The surplice is a long white vestment, with full sleeves, worn over the cassock (the black vestment we talked about last issue.) The name, interestingly enough, comes from "superpelliceum", which means "over a fur garment", since, as we have mentioned, churches were often without roofs, and very often cold. Cassocks were furlined. Surplices may be as short as just below the knees, or up till ankle length, which is more common in England.

Around the time of the Reformation, and perhaps because Protestants thought they were too "Romish", some surplices were made shorter and shorter until in the 18th century the cotta appeared. This is white, short sleeved, and is a short vestment extending only to the waist. Acolytes, choir members, lay readers and even visiting clergy may wear cottas.

The mitre (or miter) is the insignia of the bishop. It is a double shield shaped hat. Mitres are made of satin and have two ribbons ("lappets") hanging down the back. Bishop Duncan is quite adept at putting on his mitre and flipping the ribbons down the back instead of in his hair. The two points of the mitre signify the Old and New Testaments.

Mitres are the prerogative only of the bishop, but they are optional. Bishop Duvall did not choose to wear one. Bishop Carpenter, standing 6'6", couldn't wear one safely.

Another of the bishops' vestments is the cope. This is an ornate cloak in the form of a half circle. It is full length and secured in front with a clasp. Copes are in the color of the liturgical season.

The bishop, as chief pastor of the diocese, carries a crozier, similar to and derived from a shepherd's crook. It is also called his pastoral staff. Great symbolism! No attribute of the ministry is of greater importance than being a pastor, a shepherd. Croziers are often ornate, wooden, but sometimes at least partially of metal and bejeweled. Our bishop carries a genuine shepherd's crook. The real thing. You can't beat that.

Collects in the Episcopal Church

One of the treasures of our Episcopal Church is the collects. We think about these not only when we say or read them, but let's do it right now, and consider their history and deep meaning.

First, a definition and a clarification. The clarification comes first: We receive offerings in church; we do not take up collections. The latter sounds like we're selling tickets. Picky point? The definition: "Collect" from the Latin, meaning to gather, or a gathering. Related to a legion of other words ("legion" is one of them), like lectern, dyslexia, diligent, and dialect. Application: to gather our thoughts together, precisely the terminology our Vicar uses before the service, asking that we collect our thoughts.

Collects are found in the Anglican and Roman Catholic, and Lutheran Churches, but are not used in the Greek or Eastern Orthodox, nor in other Protestant churches. They are venerable, pure, and meaningful parts of our liturgy.

Collects are said to "ask for one thing only", and are generally focused on a single theme—as in the Collect for Grace and the Collect for Purity on pages 57 and 323 of the Book of Common Prayer, respectively. Collects are literary forms, as well, structured as are sonnets and odes. First: an address to God, usually to God the Father, often preceded by a descriptor such as "almighty", "merciful", and "eternal".

Then the petition. We mentioned that collects are generally singular in their petition. What are we asking for? Forgiveness, protection, guidance, comfort, holiness, love.

Next, what has been called the "aspiration", the reason for the petition, "so that we" For example, the collect for All Saints' Day: "...Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys....."

Then the doxology, "...In the Name of Jesus Christ" a pleading, since it is through Jesus that we can draw near the Father.

Let's parse the deeply meaningful Collect for Purity in the service of Holy Communion: Almighty God; unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit; that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy Holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer established our Book of Common Prayer in 1549, writing some collects and passing along other more ancient ones.

Monastic Orders in the Episcopal Church

In turbulent reformation England, monasteries had disappeared by 1538. The remaining monks and nuns had largely become pensioners of the government. All that was left behind were ruins of buildings, so anxious were the English to divest themselves of the Romish, the papist influence.

But, there is a valid need for the disciplined, principled monastic life by many earnest Christians. Actually, the vocation was begun in the Egyptian desert. There under the spiritual direction of St. Anthony, St. Padnomius started the first Christian monastic communities in a family structure, with the head being the abbot, from the Aramaic word 'abba", father; and the monks assuming the designation of brothers. Both communal and solitary monastics became popular, filling a need many Christians had.

In 500 AD Benedict chose to be an ascetic monk and promulgated the Benedictine Rule, upon which many communities of "the religious" (monks and nuns) are based.

Back to England. This destruction of monasteries was doomed. Monasticism filled the spiritual needs of many. Religious orders were revived. It was in the 1840s that some Christian Englishwomen, despairing of widespread immorality in Victorian England, left their homes to serve the poor as nuns. The idea spread rapidly, and crossed the Atlantic. There were opponents; it took the women out of the home and their chores. There were proponents: it gave women a role in the church. One such group called themselves the Sisters of St. Mary. It was composed both of Episcopalians and Roman Catholics.

The Sisters of St. Mary heroically nursed the victims of yellow fever in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1878, during an epidemic which so ravaged the city that it lost its charter for 14 years. It was not known then that mosquitoes were the vector of the disease. The devastation was incomprehensible. Thousands fled the city for high ground, recognizing that for whatever reason damp lowlands were dangerous. Five thousand people died of yellow fever in Memphis. The mortality rate of infected whites was 70%. (Of blacks, only 7%.) Most of the Sisters of St. Mary died caring for the ill. Still today they are remembered in history as the Martyrs of Memphis.

Episcopal men began to form monastic communities. In 1856 the Rev. Richard Benson founded the Society of St John the Evangelist, SSJE. Subsequently came the Order of the Holy Cross. It is not widely known that there are many Episcopal monks and nuns, belonging to several orders and communities. Most follow the Benedictine rule, "ora et labora", worship and work. Membership can be as a monk or nun, but priests and lay can be affiliated in several ways. Bishop Duncan is a member of the Society of St. John the Evangelist. Our good friend, Fr. Mark Dunnam, was a Benedictne monk for several years. (Some monastic "contemplative" orders scorn idle talk and basically practice silence and solitary, withdrawn living. Mark was not, could not be, of such a persuasion. We like him better this way.)

The monastic life, monks and nuns, is alive and well in the Church today.

History of Lent

Let's begin with the last day of revelry before Lent, Shrove Tuesday, also (and more widely) known as Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday. To shrive is to confess one's sins and to be forgiven. Mardi Gras celebrations have effectively replaced the expression and indeed the significance of Shrove Tuesday. Maybe the revelers didn't have any waywardness to confess, or maybe they were too busy. Oh, well. Lent begins the next day.

Lent—almost too late to write about it. Save it till next year. The word comes from an ancient word meaning springtime, *lencten*, and related to *lengthen* and *long*. The days are lengthening, and have been, of course, since the Winter Solstice, December 21, the shortest day of the year. The lengthening of days after a while becomes a harbinger of spring—and Lent. The lengthening continues and we come to the Spring Equinox, on March 21 or so, when the days and nights are of equal length. More on the Spring (or Vernal) Equinox in a few minutes.

The period leading up to the most important day of the Christian year, Easter, has traditionally been one of penance and penitence, self-examination and preparation for Easter. New Christians were traditionally baptized on Easter Even, at the Great Vigil of Easter, or on Easter. The period of preparation has not always been 40 days. In the earliest recorded observances, Lent lasted only two or three days. Fasting was pretty much limited to the baptismal candidates, who really fasted in order to focus their attention, so to speak.

At the Council of Nicea in 325 (from which we also get the Nicene Creed) in 325, the Church discussed a 40-day period of preparation and the custom spread. The number 40 has biblical significance. Noah and his crew and passengers were at sea for 40 days. Moses journeyed with the Israelites for 40 days. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness resisting temptation. Pope Gregory later set the beginning of Lent on Wednesday 40 days before Easter, not counting Sundays, which are always feast days in commemoration of the Resurrection. Gregory is reputed also to have established the practice of the imposition of ashes on that day. Traditionally these ashes are from palms of the previous year's Palm Sunday, with the symbolism of repentance ("sackcloth and ashes") and of mortality in the words of the imposition, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return". Clergy wear vestments that reflect the sackcloth theme during Lent.

Sackcloth and ashes. Sackcloth, a coarse fibered cloth, was in Biblical days made out of camel or goat hair. Garments made of sackcloth were traditionally worn as symbols of penitence—and discomfort.

The observance of Lent, of course, varies with the church and with the individual members. The principle remains: preparation for the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox, Easter, the holiest day of the year.



Don Palmer and wife, Elaine

Dr. Don Palmer, beloved member of St. Paul's Magnolia Springs and so much more, passed away on May 29, 2018. He leaves behind a rich and loving legacy of family, friends, and wisdom.