‘The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’

Lecture for the Bishop of Richborough’s Initial Ministerial Education Session
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The Declaration of Assent
(Canon C 15; Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England, p. xi)

PREFACE

The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. In the declaration you are about to make will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making Him known to those in your care?

DECLARATION OF ASSENT

I, A B, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will use only the forms of service which are authorised or allowed by Canon.

Loyalty

‘In the declaration you are about to make will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith…?’ At one of the most solemn moments of your lives, you were asked that question, and you will continue to be asked it, whenever you are licensed or instituted to another office in the Church of England. The loyalty that is asked of you is, of course, to the whole of the inheritance of faith that is described in the Preface to the Declaration of Assent and summarized in the Declaration itself. The question is primarily about your loyalty to ‘the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds’, but you are also required to affirm that the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness to that faith. The Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and the 1662 Ordinal (overall, rather than in every detail) are part of the inheritance to which you have affirmed your loyalty.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference called upon the churches of the Anglican Communion ‘to affirm that those who dissent from, as well as those who assent to, the ordination of women
to the priesthood and episcopate are both loyal Anglicans’ (Resolution III.2). This had been
instigated by Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, who gathered a group of traditional catholic bishops
and women bishops for informal discussions, out of which this motion came. Then in 2006
the General Synod passed a resolution which, among other things, endorsed that Lambeth
Conference resolution. That endorsement was inserted by an amendment moved by Fr David
Houlding on behalf of the Catholic Group. Meeting in December 2012 after the failure of the
first Women Bishops Measure, the House of Bishops said that in order to command assent
any new proposals would need to include a clear embodiment of this recognition of us as
loyal Anglicans. That is what lies behind the fourth of the Five Guiding Principles, which
says first that our theological conviction continues to be within the spectrum of Anglican
teaching and tradition, and secondly that, because the conviction we hold is an Anglican
theological conviction, the Church of England is committed to enabling us to flourish.¹ This
is a very practical reason why it is important to make sure that we actually are recognizably
what we have repeatedly claimed to be – loyal Anglicans.

Loyalty does not need to be, and indeed should not be, uncritical. Heaven knows, there is
much to criticize in the Church of England – as in every other church. But we have all chosen
to remain in this church when we could have gone elsewhere. I think we need to reflect on
why we have done that, and to draw the consequences of it. One of the things that distresses
me about the Catholic Movement – it’s a strong word, but it is the word I mean: distresses me
– is the tendency in some quarters constantly to disparage the church to which we belong, its
institutions and its liturgy. It doesn’t sound very loyal, and it is hardly calculated to win us
sympathy or encourage others to honour the commitments that they have made to us in the
House of Bishops’ Declaration. It is also, I fear, in danger of being psychologically and
spiritually damaging. We are catholics but we are also Anglicans: that is part of our identity,
part of who we are. I am no expert on psychology or indeed spirituality, but surely
psychological and spiritual wholeness comes from loving who we are. When people loathe
aspects of their own identity, the consequences can be quite nasty. In their recent statement
‘Communion and Catholicity in the Church of England’ ² – a statement which I believe will
repay careful study and deep reflection – our bishops have called for ‘love for the Church of
England, for its people and for its life, structures and mission’ (para. 4.1).

Memory and Breadth

Loyalty to one’s family doesn’t preclude the odd joke, providing the humour is kind rather
than mocking. I sometimes think that the Church of England is rather like a dignified old lady
who has come on hard times. She would, I’m sure, have been a beneficiary of the Distressed
Gentlefolk’s Aid Association – before the end of class distinction forced that venerable
charity to change its name. Our old lady is suffering for two reasons. First, her memory isn’t
what it was – she has lost the plot a bit. In a curious reversal, it’s her long-term memory that
has gone. She is fairly well in touch with what was going on the day before yesterday. Her
second problem is that she doesn’t get out much, so she’s not quite sure what’s going on in
the wider world. She’s also a bit deaf. What she needs is a nice young curate to come and talk

¹ ‘Since those within the Church of England who, on grounds of theological conviction, are unable to receive the
ministry of women bishops or priests continue to be within the spectrum of teaching and tradition of the
Anglican Communion, the Church of England remains committed to enabling them to flourish within its life and
structures.’

² ‘Communion and Catholicity in the Church of England: A Statement of Principles by the Council of Bishops
of The Society’ in Communion, Catholicity and a Catholic Life: Statements by the Council of Bishops of The
to her. She needs a curate who will love her and be loyal to her, but love and loyalty will not be enough. He’ll need to know the story that she’s in danger of forgetting. And as to the present, it’s no good him knowing only what is going on in the old people’s home where our dear old lady lives – he’ll need to be able to tell her what’s happening in the wider world. And he’ll need to speak clearly and confidently – no mumbling, no beating round the bush – because she is a bit deaf, you know.

That, then is part of our calling – your calling – in the Church of England, our contribution to her life. We are the ones who will remind the Church of England of her tradition, her inheritance of faith, and we are the ones who are listening to what the rest of the Church is saying beyond these shores. Being a loyal Anglican is anything other than being a Little Englander. We are the ones who are – or should be – able to locate the Church of England today in the wider context of the Church throughout the world and across the ages. These two dimensions relate to some extent to the notes of apostolicity and catholicity. Apostolicity is a wider concept than tradition, but tradition is at its heart. Catholicity is about the whole Church, so it is not confined to the living and therefore not to the present (unless we include in the present all the Christians of past ages who are, as Rowan Williams has remarked, ‘our contemporaries in Christ’). Yet to be catholic is to a significant extent to look to the whole of today’s Church and not just to this part of it. So it is at least in part in knowing the story and knowing the wider Church that we ensure that we are apostolic and catholic.

To be able to fulfil our role of helping the Church of England to be catholic and apostolic, then, we do need to know the news of what is going on out there today, but we also need to know the story – the tradition – and in particular to know our own tradition, the tradition of the Church to which we belong as well as the catholic tradition of the whole Church. When *Consecrated Women?*, the Forward in Faith report on the theological reasons why women cannot be bishops was being drafted, one of the comments made was that there was quite a lot of quotation from the documents of the Second Vatican Council (which was good) but hardly any quotation from the Anglican tradition – from our formularies and from the seventeenth- and eighteenth century divines whose works the Oxford Movement fathers collected and published in that remarkable series, the Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology, or indeed from authoritative Anglican sources of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That was rectified, but it was a telling point. In the 1950s Anglican Catholics were steeped in the catholic tradition of our own church, as the Oxford Movement fathers had been a century before. But fifty years later their successors knew much about the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church today but the catholic tradition of our own church was not at the forefront of their minds. If part of our role is to call the Church of England back to its catholic vocation, we do need to know its catholic tradition.

**Part of the One Church**

‘The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church – discuss’. That is the essay question that the Bishop of Richborough has given me for today. At least I didn’t get that old chestnut, ‘Can archdeacons be saved?’ I am not going to discuss this statement in the sense of discussing whether it is true – if it isn’t, none of us has any justification in being here – but I do want to look at some aspects of that phrase, which opens the Preface to the Declaration of Assent.

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Arguably the most important word is one that I suspect passes, for some who make the Declaration, without notice: the only noun that is neither in the name of our church nor in the Nicene Creed: ‘part’. This statement in the Preface to the Declaration of Assent stands in stark contrast to the teaching of Pope Pius XII that ‘the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same thing’ (Humani Generis 27) and his reference in an encyclical to the ‘true Church of Jesus Christ – which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church’ (Mystici Corporis Christi 13), which seemed effectively to add a fifth note to the four notes of the Church found in the Nicene Creed. As is well known, the Second Vatican Council was more nuanced. It used ‘is’ in one place (Orientalium Ecclesiarum 2) but famously substituted for it the phrase ‘subsists in’ in another place – the dogmatic constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium (8):

‘This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.’

The meaning of that phrase _subsistit in_ is much argued over, and to enter into that argument is not relevant here, but I think we can agree that while ‘subsists in’ is more nuanced than ‘is’, this teaching does not really recognize the Eastern Orthodox Church, for example, as fully part of the One Church. Not only from an Anglican point of view but indeed from a catholic point of view (with a small c), that is very problematic. The contrast with our own church’s claim merely to be ‘part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ is stark.

Here I want to refer you again to our bishops’ statement on ‘Communion and Catholicity in the Church of England’. Let me read you paragraph 4.4:

‘Important features of the Anglican tradition have been the modesty of its claims and the fact that its formularies have always pointed to the greater catholic whole. In the Preface to the Declaration of Assent the Church of England claims only to be ‘part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’, and in The Book of Common Prayer we pray for ‘the good estate of the Catholick Church’. In The Gospel and the Catholic Church (1936) Michael Ramsey wrote:

“While the Anglican church is vindicated by its place in history, with a strikingly balanced witness to Gospel and Church and sound learning, its greater vindication lies in its pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and the travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as ‘the best type of Christianity’, but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died.”’

In passing, may I just highlight some of those thoughts, before returning to the incompleteness which is my theme? First, ‘tension and travail’. There is a sense in which the Church of England is, and has been for centuries, a quasi-ecumenical fellowship, in which different strands of the Christian tradition are interwoven, variously struggling together or dancing together. That can make for tension and travail, but it can also be creative and could even be – as the Bishop of Chichester suggests in a book that Forward in Faith will be publishing later this month – a gift to the wider Church.4 One of the issues which goes back

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into the New Testament itself is that of how Christians of different views can live in fellowship together, and the Church of England is one place where we are trying to do that.

Secondly, untidiness which ‘baffles neatness and logic’. If you’re looking for a completely logical system, the Church of England is not for you. There is a mind-set shared by some Roman Catholics and some Evangelicals, whereby there is a book of words in which you can find all the answers, arranged in a logical, scientific system. (In one case it’s the Bible, in the other it’s the Catechism of the Catholic Church, but the principle, the mind-set, is the same). It is perhaps no accident that Bishop Graham Leonard, educated in an evangelical school and trained as a scientist, chose in the end to become a Roman Catholic when other Anglo-Catholic bishops did not. The Roman Catholic Church is of course a broad church and the mind-set of which I speak, which systemizes and codifies everything, has only a limited purchase on certain cultures – it is not very much to the fore in the Church of France, for example. But if you have that sort of mind-set, you’ll be very unhappy in the Church of England. It will always baffle neatness and logic. For some of us, that untidiness, those loose ends, that flexibility and breadth and diversity, are part of its appeal.

But after those digressions I must return to my theme. In the mid-twentieth century Anglicans in general, and not just Anglo-Catholics, were very conscious of the provisionality of the Anglican Communion. It was very much seen as a church that existed not to be different from the rest of the catholic Church but rather to promote and express catholic teaching in the particular national and social contexts in which it was placed. In my book Aspects of Anglican Identity I present quite a few typical statements of this sort by leading Anglicans of that era, most of whom were not Anglo-Catholics. In their statement on ‘Communion and Catholicity in the Church of England’ our bishops quote in a footnote the well-known comment of Archbishop Fisher – by no stretch of the imagination an Anglo-Catholic – in 1951: ‘We have no doctrine of our own – we only possess the Catholic doctrine of the Catholic Church enshrined in the Catholic creeds, and those creeds we hold without addition or diminution.’ (Incidentally the inclusion of that quotation was suggested by one of the priests whom the bishops consulted about their statements – it was a participative, consultative process.)

Reception

As the bishops point out in para. 4.5 of their statement, the modesty that is reflected in the opening of the Preface to the Declaration of Assent can also be found in the third of the Five Guiding Principles. As they comment:

“The Church of England has retained, to some degree at least, a sense of modesty and reserve about the extent of its competence, as part of the catholic Church, to take decisions on things that belong to the whole Church. The third of the Five Guiding Principles includes the statement that “the Church of England acknowledges that its own clear decision on ministry and gender is set within a broader process of discernment within the Anglican Communion and the whole Church of God”.’

The technical term for ‘discernment’ is of course ‘reception’ – the idea that a doctrine (or in this case a practice) may come eventually to be received by the whole Church or rejected by the whole Church. What I like to call the Rowell resolution of the 1998 Lambeth Conference (Lambeth III.2), which I have already quoted, also called upon the churches of the Anglican

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6 ‘Communion and Catholicity in the Church of England’, para. 4.4, n. 18.
Communion ‘to uphold the principle of “Open Reception” as it relates to the ordination of women to the priesthood…; noting that “reception is a long and spiritual process”.

We should have very mixed feelings about the application of the idea of reception to the ordination of women in the Church of England. Taking our stand precisely on those words at the beginning of the Preface to the Declaration of Assent, we must continue to argue that in this case the part has behaved as if it were the whole, and arrogated to itself a decision that no part of the Church, and certainly not such a small part as the Provinces of Canterbury and York, has a right to take. Here the idea of ‘subsidiarity’ comes into play, whereby decisions are to be taken at the lowest appropriate level – and I stress the word ‘appropriate’. It is perfectly proper for a parish church to decide the time at which mass will be offered on Sunday. On the other hand, I guess a large majority of the Church of England would at least recognize, if the point were put to them, that the Church of England would not have the right to remove a line from the Nicene Creed, since the Creed is the property of the whole Church. Our point is that holy orders are like the creeds – the property of the whole Church – and therefore only the whole Church can alter them.

Last year I published a book of essays by my late friend Canon Roger Greenacre on this very subject. It addresses those themes in much more detail that I can today, under the title Part of the One Church. Roger was agnostic on the principle of ordaining women to the priesthood – if anything, he was even marginally in favour – but he was implacably opposed to the idea that a part of the Church could behave as if it were the whole, and he also could not comprehend how anyone who believed in the unity of the Church could take an action that could only lead to greater disunity and entrench separation. The book is thus about the ecclesiological and ecumenical arguments, not the argument of principle. Those two sets of arguments are, of course, distinct. The ecumenical argument is about what ordaining women as bishops and priests does to our relations with other churches and to the unity of the Church, whereas the ecclesiological argument is about what it does to the self-understanding, integrity and identity of our own church.

So in one sense we would oppose the application of the idea of reception to something that shouldn’t be done unilaterally at all. But if you are going to ordain women to the episcopate and the priesthood and retain any claim to catholicity, you have to do what the Church of England has done. You have to recognize that that decision is subject to review, and ultimately to the possibility of rejection, by the whole Church in East and West. Frankly, the Church of England would have ordained women to the priesthood and then to the episcopate sooner or later, even without the fig leaf that the idea of a process of reception offers, so its application to this case hasn’t really lost us anything. But the fact that in the third Guiding Principle the Church of England says that its decision ‘is set within a broader process of discernment within the Anglican Communion and the whole Church of God’ is one of the pieces of evidence that supports its claim to be part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, because in espousing the idea of reception it recognizes an ultimate authority beyond itself. It was the application of the idea of reception to women’s ordination in the Act of Synod that enabled Roger Greenacre to remain in the Church of England.

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8 ‘Since it continues to share the historic episcopate with other Churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and those provinces of the Anglican Communion which continue to ordain only men as priests or bishops, the Church of England acknowledges that its own clear decision on ministry and gender is set within a broader process of discernment within the Anglican Communion and the whole Church of God.’
Commitment to Visible Unity

Returning to our bishops’ statement, in para. 4.6 they list some aspects of the contribution that we should be making to the Church of England. One of these is ‘to emphasize the Church of England’s rootedness in the tradition of the universal Church in East and West’. Note their deliberate reference to the East here: Rome is not our only point of reference, though as we are a detached part of the western Church it will probably always be our main one. They conclude this section in para. 4.7 by saying, ‘We see ourselves as called to assist the Church of England in fulfilling its commitment to the full, visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ.’ As they point out in a footnote, this is a commitment that the General Synod has repeatedly re-affirmed.

This reminds us of another aspect of the significance of that phrase ‘The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’. To quote Michael Ramsey again, the Church of England ‘is sent… by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church’. Every time we remind ourselves that we are a part not the whole, we remind ourselves of Our Lord’s prayer ‘that they may be one’, of the longing to be part of the whole. For us, this means not leaving as individuals, or even in groups, the part of the Church in which God has placed us, but continuing to pray for the corporate reunion of our part of the Church Catholic with the rest of the Western Church, with Rome at its centre, and for the unity of the whole Church in East and West. That opening phrase of the Declaration of Assent is a charter for ecumenical commitment.

In the final section of their statement on Communion and Catholicity in the Church of England, our bishops call on us in para. 5.1 to be outward-looking – ‘attentive to the mind of the universal Church’ as well as to the needs of the wider community.

A Wider Frame of Reference

I said earlier on that part of our contribution to the Church of England is that we are the ones who are looking at the big picture. We are listening to the Church beyond these provinces and beyond the Anglican Communion. In our bishops’ words, we are ‘attentive to the mind of the universal Church’. Another way of putting this is to say that we have a wider frame of reference – we are not just myopically concerned with the here and now. We are not completely inculturated in our own time and place, our thinking is not completely determined by the ambient culture. We are not unable to stand back and see things in a wider perspective.

In applying this wider perspective to the Church of England we are doing what Anglicans have done for centuries. We are responding to an aspect of the Church of England’s character that I would like to highlight. The English Reformation was, of course, marked by radical discontinuity in several respects. Here in Walsingham we are confronted by that, in the ruins of the Priory and the Friary. In the past, Anglo-Catholics have often downplayed that discontinuity – to the extent that you could be forgiven for wondering whether the Reformation actually happened at all. The Shrine Church was deliberately designed in such a way as to give an impression of continuity, to make it appear that the Reformation had never happened. Anglo-Catholics may in the past have presented a distorted picture of our church’s history, but they were right to point out that the continuity of the post-Reformation Church of England with the pre-Reformation Church of England (and yes, that is how Ecclesia Anglicana was translated into English before the Reformation) is important and multi-facettet. It is not limited to the continuity in the transmission of holy orders or the continuity
in the historic episcopal sees. The diocesan structure of the Church of England continued intact – dioceses, archdeaconries, deaneries. So did the synodical structure – at least nationally, in the Convocations of Canterbury and York. The cathedrals of the old foundation were vehicles of continuity, governed according to their mediaeval statutes. Continuity can even be identified to some degree in those former monastic cathedrals that became cathedrals of the new foundation.

Liturgy

But the elements of continuity that I want to highlight are those of liturgy and law. In many ways, of course, the Book of Common Prayer represents radical discontinuity. Yet we can still often hear echoes of the Sarum liturgy underlying it. The differences are great indeed, but the old liturgy was not replaced with something that bore no relation to it – something, for example, based solely on Scripture that didn’t draw at all on the tradition of the Church as it had been received and expressed in these islands. 1552 was farther from the tradition than 1549 – more bare, more stripped down – but from 1559 onwards the pendulum began to swing back: 1662 echoes the tradition a bit more. The point I want to make is that because the Book of Common Prayer is part of the catholic liturgical tradition, albeit representing a very stripped-down version of it indeed, it is appropriate to interpret it in the light of that tradition.

That is what Catholic Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics have done since the seventeenth century at least – people like Andrewes and Cosin, people like Robert Nelson in the early eighteenth century and John Keble in the nineteenth, not to speak of the Ritualists and their successors. The very nature of the Prayer Book liturgy, and even more so that of Common Worship, demands that we read it and interpret it in the light of the ancient tradition of our own church and the wider tradition of the catholic Church. In doing that we are not being disloyal but responding to the very nature of our liturgical tradition. The way we celebrate the liturgy and the way Anglo-Catholics have always embellished it, drawing on the mediaeval liturgy and on the current liturgy of the wider Church, is not a foreign imposition but a response to the nature of the Anglican liturgy itself. Those who wrote the Book of Common Prayer had the Sarum liturgy open on their desks; those who wrote Common Worship had the Roman liturgical books on their desks. I recall that at meetings of the Revision Committee that revised the draft Common Worship Ordinal, of which I was the Secretary, Canon Robin Ward had the Roman pontifical open on the desk in front of him. We are the ones who know what our liturgy means and how it should be celebrated, because we know the catholic tradition from which it stemmed and the catholic context in which it is to be interpreted.

Let me give you just one example that springs to mind. In 1662 a collect was added to the rite for the ordination of a bishop (previously the collect had been the collect of the day, as it was in the Sarum rite). It begins, ‘Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy holy Apostles many excellent gifts, and didst charge them to feed thy flock; Give grace, we beseech thee, to all Bishops, the Pastors of thy Church… [and so on]’. Many Anglicans will look at that and think it is a ‘nice prayer’. We know the catholic tradition, so we get the point immediately: God gave many excellent gifts to the Apostles and charged them with feeding his flock, and now we are asking him to give grace to all bishops as pastors of his Church. We know that the tradition understands bishops to be the successors of the Apostles, so we can understand exactly why those who revised the Ordinal in 1662 added that prayer to it, and what point they were trying to make by doing so.
Canon Law

So much for liturgy. I turn now to the law. Here my case is even stronger. Henry VIII nationalized the English branch of that international corporation the Western Catholic Church. He privatized many of its assets, but (with the very important exception of the monastic houses) he left its structure intact. He also left the laws that governed it largely intact. Most of the ancient canon law – the law that was common to the whole of the Western Church – was not abrogated. The canon law was subordinated to statute law, but as much of the canon law that was in force in England on the eve of the Reformation, does not conflict with statute law or the royal prerogative, and has not fallen into complete disuse is still in force today. When I was in Church House eyebrows were sometimes raised, by those whose understanding of our church is something of a flickering light, when a question was put to the Legal Office and the response copiously cited the decisions of various councils of the early Church. But the Legal Office was of course absolutely right. The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and those canons of the councils of the undivided Church that have consistently been acted upon in the Church of England for the last 1400 years are still in force today.

Part of that inherited canon law was codified in the Code of Canons of 1603, and those canons were almost completely replaced in the 1960s by the present Canons of the Church of England (I shall return to the ‘almost’ later on). The 1960s canons took the codification a bit further: things that have always been part of English ecclesiastical law but were not mentioned in the 1603 Canons are now included in our modern Canons. But it is still the case that even the modern Canons only encompass part of the canon law that is in force in the Church of England. Behind and around them is the canon law inherited from the mediaeval church. This is actually another point of difference from the Roman Catholic Church today. Roman Catholic canon law has been completely codified in the Code of Canon Law. I think it is true to say that for the Roman Catholic Church that if it is not in that book it is not canon law. In this as in so much else the Church of England is closer to the mediaeval church: it is less tidy, less systematized, and in quite a few respects less reformed. There are of course both advantages and disadvantages in that; my point is simply that that is how it is.

All of this means that you can only properly understand the law of our Church if you understand the general law of the wider Church. If you are going to interpret it, you need to look at how others are interpreting that same law in other parts of the Church. And that of course is exactly what our ecclesiastical lawyers have been doing since the Reformation. The system of ecclesiastical courts and their officers continued through the Reformation. They have developed and they have also been subject to reform, but the continuity is clear for all to see. Those who staffed those courts before the Reformation continued to staff them afterwards. And they continued to be in touch with the ways in which the same law was being administered on the Continent.

That was easy of course, because the Church had a lingua franca – Latin – in which these matters were discussed, and learned people in England continued to be familiar with it. Indeed, for example, the legal procedure of confirmation of election, whereby someone becomes a diocesan bishop, continued to be carried out in Latin for a couple of hundred years after the Reformation. It was only in the mid-eighteenth century that they got around to translating it into English. The ceremonies for installing people as canons of cathedrals and collegiate churches were only recently translated (or in some cases mis-translated) into English – here and there the Latin still persists – for example in Westminster Abbey.
Latin was, of course, the language of the clergy more generally, because it was the language of the Church. Public worship was to be conducted in a language that the people could understand, but people could say the offices privately ‘in any language that they themselves do understand’. So it was that the Prayer Book was published in Latin for use in colleges and schools, and so it was, for example, that when the Convocations or synods of the Church of England met for worship that worship was conducted in Latin. The sermon used to be preached in Latin, until it came to the point that most of the members were incapable of understanding it. The last person to preach to the Convocation of Canterbury in Latin was the late Bishop of Chichester, Eric Kemp, when he was Chaplain of Exeter College, Oxford, in 1955. I think the service continued to be in Latin right up until the inception of the General Synod in 1970.

The canon law differs of course from most of the law of England in that it derives from the European civil law and does not form part of the English common law tradition. The same was true of the law of the sea, for the obvious reason that the sea was the only physical point of contact between an island nation and the European main. Much family law, concerning inheritance and marriage, was subject to the ecclesiastical courts. These branches of the law – ecclesiastical law, family law and the law of the sea – were administered by lawyers whose professional base was Doctors’ Commons in London (also called the College of Civilians, because they practised civil law). The abolition of the ecclesiastical courts’ jurisdiction over wills and marriage in 1857 and the right given to common-law barristers in 1859 to appear in the Admiralty Court sounded the death-knell of Doctors’ Commons. In 1865 its buildings were sold. Its membership eventually died out. The ecclesiastical courts continued, but were increasingly operated by barristers whose training was largely in the common law. Not until 1987 was a new Ecclesiastical Law Society created, in response to a call from Bishop Eric Kemp, as a focus for the study of ecclesiastical law.

But understanding of the canon law continued during that intermission: the expertise remained – held by ecclesiastical lawyers and also by academics such as Bishop Eric himself. You can see that expertise documented in the Canon Law Commission’s report, published in 1947, which eventually resulted in the canons that we have today. The report included drafts of the new canons, copiously annotated with the sources in the mediaeval canon law – both the general law of the Church and the local canons of the pre-Reformation English Church – from which they were largely drawn. The book is a work of art: the typography, with engraved dropped capitals at the beginning of each chapter of the draft canons, is beautiful.

The period from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s was the heyday of Anglo-Catholic influence over the Church of England, so it was a very good time for the new canons to be produced. The opportunity was taken to include much catholic teaching that reflected the existing legal position but had not previously been expressed in the 1603 Canons. Take Canon A 5, for example:

‘The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.’

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9 The Book of Common Prayer: ‘Concerning the Service of the Church’.
That encapsulates the approach that has been the subject of much of this address: the Church of England is part of the Catholic Church; its formularies – doctrinal, liturgical and legal – form part of the tradition of the Catholic Church and are to be interpreted in the light of it.

Other highlights include Canon C 1, which teaches that ordination confers an indelible character (‘No person who has been admitted to the order of bishop, priest, or deacon can ever be divested of the character of his order’). I am also particularly attached to Canon C 18: ‘Every bishop is the chief pastor of all that are within his diocese, as well clergy as laity, and their father in God.’ Another canon now allows women to be bishops, so the Church of England officially teaches that women can be fathers (though of course they mustn’t be husbands): as Archbishop Ramsey said, the Church of England sometimes baffles neatness and logic. I suppose that the reason why Canon C 18 was not amended was that to do so would be to admit that you have to change the doctrinal definition of the office of bishop in order to be able to admit women to it.

Be that as it may, these are examples of where the canons of our church teach catholic doctrine. In the 1947 report, the draft canons were copiously annotated with learned references to the canons of the pre-Reformation Church. This demonstrates that the new canons merely made explicit what was already legally the case, because of the nature of the Church of England as part of the catholic Church, subject in large part to its canons and inheriting its tradition.

I said that I would come back to that part of the 1603 Canons that was not replaced in the 1960s but is still in force – it is the proviso to Canon 113 of 1603, which admonishes priests not to reveal what is confessed by a penitent. The Canon says that, but not a lot more than that. It needs to be fleshed out, put in context, in order to be understood. You are the ones who understand the concept of the seal of the confessional – the theology and practice of hearing confessions that explains why that should be so. And indeed, to go back to my earlier examples, as catholics, you are the ones who understand why deacons, priests or bishops can never be divested of the character of their orders, because you understand the concepts of character and orders. And as catholics, we are the ones who understand what it means to say that a bishop is a father in God, because we know the tradition that that statement represents. The canons of the Church of England are the tips of icebergs if you like – the bits of the tradition that poke up above the surface. We are the ones who have plumbed the depths of the tradition. To change the metaphor, we are the ship’s lookouts who, when we see a headland, know what lies behind it, because we are familiar with the territory beyond. This knowing and holding the tradition, and this wider frame of reference, are part of what we have to contribute to the Church of England.

One final comment before I leave the field of canon law. Some of the best ecclesiastical lawyers of our own day are Anglo-Catholics. It is no accident, I would contend, that Anglo-Catholics are to the fore in the field of ecclesiastical law. We are the ones who understand theologically that the law is one of the ways in which the Spirit orders the Church. We are the ones who view the Church of England in the context of the catholic tradition, and understand that canon law is one of the ways in which that tradition is embodied, handed on and expressed. We are the ones who have that wider frame of reference that is needed in order to be able to interpret canon law properly. We may live on an island, but we are in touch with the main. And what a joy for a me, as an anglo-catholic in my mid-50s, that these Anglo-Catholic canonists are significantly younger than I am: the tradition continues.
The Declaration of Assent

In conclusion I shall look briefly at the rest of the Preface and Declaration of Assent. I wrote an account of its origins in my book *Aspects of Anglican Identity*.

It is a fruit of the much-maligned General Synod process. Perhaps you will forgive me, as a former Clerk to the General Synod, if I defend that institution for a moment. It is certainly far from perfect, but its critics often fail to explain what they would put in its place. Are people advocating a democratic structure in which the votes of the bishops are worth no more than the votes of the rest and the House of Bishops has no rights beyond those of the other Houses? Or are they advocating a system whereby bishops govern the Church without any consultation with the faithful or indeed the clergy? Both types of system exist elsewhere, but not to good effect. It is when Anglo-Catholics start blaming our woes on the replacement of the clerical Convocations back in 1970 with a General Synod involving a House of Laity that I really begin to wonder where they have been these last 45 years. The House of Laity has not been the problem – it is the House of Clergy and the House of Bishops that have lost the plot. That is what the voting figures on the most contentious matters repeatedly tell us. It is the laity who have kept the faith and stopped the other two Houses from doing things that would have left the Church of England’s catholic identity in a much more parlous state than it now is.

So then, let us look briefly at that creation of a synodical revision process, the Preface and Declaration of Assent. Look at the second phrase: after saying what the Church of England is, the Preface says that it worships. That, I suggest, is a typically Anglican emphasis. The Church exists primarily not to proclaim the Gospel, not as a mission agency (important as mission is), not in order to promote or defend some particular doctrine, but for the worship of God. The point of proclaiming the Gospel, the point of mission, is to bring people to the worship of God, which is the Church’s primary purpose. The Church of England’s identity is found and expressed in the way we worship, and that is why the Book of Common Prayer is not just a book of services but also one of three historic formularies in which our doctrine is ‘in particular… to be found’.

Next we have the theological statement that God is one God in three persons: we are a Trinitarian church. And after that, there is a statement about the faith. Again, we stress the Scriptures, as the place where the faith is uniquely revealed, and the creeds of the undivided Church as the place where the faith is set forth. Next comes an important new emphasis, expressed in a very well-crafted phrase proposed by a lay member of the General Synod (a solicitor from the Diocese of Portsmouth) during the revision process: ‘which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation’. The faith of Anglicans is the unchanging faith of the catholic Church, revealed in the Scriptures and set forth in the Creeds, but the Church is called upon to proclaim that faith ‘afresh’ in each generation. It is not to proclaim a new faith, but to proclaim that same faith in a fresh way – a way appropriate to each generation. So there is a dynamic quality to our proclamation, which is always changing in line with the culture, even though the faith itself is unchanging. We need to be rooted in the past (a tree that has lost touch with its roots will die) without living in the past.

Only in the third of the four sentences do we come to anything specific to the Church of England: The historic formularies are mentioned, but as a way in which the Church of England has borne witness to Christian truth in the past. Finally, in the fourth sentence, there is the requirement of loyalty to the faith, the missionary task and pastoral responsibility.

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The Declaration itself is much more tightly drawn. The minister declares belief not in any specifically Anglican formulation but in the Christian faith of the catholic Church. And it is here that we find a very precise formulation of the relationship between faith, Scriptures, creeds and formularies: it is ‘the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness’. Thus there is no requirement to assent to every detail of the historic formularies. Loyalty to the general ‘inheritance of faith’, of which those formularies form part, is required, and the person making the Declaration agrees that the formularies bear witness to the faith, but it is the faith revealed in the Scriptures and set forth in the creeds in which he or she is required to believe.

The Declaration concludes not, as one might expect in a Continental Protestant declaration, with a promise to preach in accordance with a confession of faith, such as the Augsburg Confession, but with a promise that ‘in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will use only the forms of service which are authorised or allowed by Canon’. For the Church of England it is common prayer, the use of the liturgies authorized or allowed by the Canons of the Church of England, which defines a loyal Anglican. In the end, as the old adage would have it, lex orandi is indeed lex credendi: for Anglicans, it is how the Church prays and worships that tells us what it believes.

Conclusion

I am conscious that this has neither been an academic lecture nor a lecture by a theologian. Instead you have heard the reflections of an historian and a practitioner, born of rather more now than a quarter century of engagement with the Church of England’s institutions, law and liturgy. I have constantly found that statement that ‘the Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ to be borne out in that practical experience.

But that phrase is not just a description or a statement of fact: it is rather more, it is a challenge and a vocation. The Oxford Movement was called into being in order to point to the catholicity and especially the apostolicity of the Church of England, and to call upon it to live up to its catholic identity and its catholic and apostolic vocation. Being a catholic in the understanding of the Oxford Movement fathers was not about building up a party in the Church but about being a loyal and faithful Anglican – an Anglican who lived up to the catholic calling of our church and helped and encouraged others to do so too. We are the real Anglicans.

Our bishops have created The society because we need a system of full communion as the context and basis for our flourishing, but that Society is here not to ignore the rest of the Church of England and feed upon itself. Rather, it is here to revitalize the Church of England and recall it to its catholic vocation. It is a big task and not one that will be accomplished overnight or indeed in my lifetime. But as an historian I think in centuries not in months or years. In some places I see decay, of course, but elsewhere I see not only faithful continuance but more green shoots than a few years ago one would have had any right to expect. Not the least of those green shoots is what you represent, the remarkable growth in vocations to the diaconate and priesthood which shows that God has a purpose for us and that we have a future in this church. For someone of my generation, to stand in front of an audience of so many deacons and priests, many of you twenty-five or more years younger than I am, is a moving experience. I thank you for your attention, but I thank you much more for your acceptance of your vocation.