

Believing with the Church

A talk given by Matthew Teel to the Our Lady of Hope Society, meeting at St. Therese Little Flower Catholic Church, Kansas City, Missouri, on Sunday, September 28, 2008.

I am excited to be back with you today.

My name is Matt Teel, and I met most of you a couple of weeks ago when I was here to talk about the gift of authority in the Catholic Church. I said then that I was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1997 by Bishop John Buchanan, and was received into the Catholic Church on August 28, 2005.

In the eight years between when I was ordained and when I was received, I became more and more convinced that the true Church of Christ is that one which our Savior, after his Resurrection, entrusted to St. Peter. I said last time that the issue of authority was one of the main reasons for my conversion: that having lived in the theological pandemonium that is modern-day Anglicanism, I became increasingly convinced that Jesus must have given us SOME person or entity with the right, the duty, and the responsibility to teach in his name. And I saw that the only Church that (a) could properly make that claim and (b) actually act on it was the Roman Catholic Church.

Now closely related to the issue of authority, of course, is the issue of belief: what are we, as Christians, going to believe or not believe—about Jesus, about the Church, about Heaven and Hell and prayer and a whole host of things. And that is the topic Father Ernie has asked me to speak on today: “Believing with the Church.”

The Branch Theory

I mentioned last time that I came up through St. Mary’s in downtown Kansas City. Some of you are familiar with St. Mary’s: it was, at one time, the great Anglo-Catholic flagship of the Episcopal Diocese of West Missouri. It was quite prominent in the 1930s and 40s; declined considerably through the 50s, 60s, and 70s; and then underwent a sort of renaissance in the late 80s and early 90s, which was when I was there.

During the time I attended St. Mary’s, I lived first in Lawrence, then in Olathe. They used to say that you could tell how high an Episcopalian was by how many parishes he passed to get to mass on Sunday. If that’s true, I must have been one of the highest, because I passed about twelve in order to get to St. Mary’s.

I was hooked from the first time I set foot inside. Solemn high mass was sung every Sunday and on every Marian feast day. And I quickly worked my way up through the acolyte corps and then got accepted to go to seminary, where I hoped to take a little of St. Mary’s to some other fortunate parish.

Now, it wasn’t until much later that I realized that the ‘solemn high mass’ at St. Mary’s was unlike any solemn high mass celebrated anywhere else in the world; it was quite

eclectic and more like what Percy Dearmer once derisively referred to as 'British museum religion.' Nevertheless, it formed in me a deep appreciation for high liturgical worship, and I began to identify myself to others as a 'Catholic'—even to the point of calling myself a Catholic in conversation, and then only clarifying what I meant if the person actually asked where I went to church. "Oh," I'd say, "I'm actually an ANGLO-Catholic, which is sort of like a Roman Catholic, but ..." and then I'd run down the list of all the ways in which we Anglicans were different. (I blush to think of that now, but it does testify, I think, to how sincerely I believed Anglicanism had a right to call itself a 'Catholic Church.')

Now, like many Anglo-Catholics, I subscribed to what is sometimes called the Branch Theory. I'm assuming you are familiar with this idea—there are three major branches on the big Catholic tree: the Roman Catholics (who we referred to, rather affectionately I thought, as 'the Romans'), the Eastern Catholics (who are usually called 'the Orthodox'), and the Anglo-Catholics (who most of the world calls Anglicans). There were also a few detached bodies, like Old Catholics and High Church Lutherans about whom I knew very little, but who seemed to me more like limbs than actual branches.

The idea is that, where Rome, Constantinople, and Canterbury agree, there is the voice of the Holy Spirit. And where they disagree, there is the vast undulating field of 'private opinion.' Constantinople was generally pretty solid; Rome thought a little too much of herself but was still reliable; and doddering old Canterbury, to my chagrin, had to be nudged from time to time and reminded that she was still part of the Catholic Church.

Canterbury, I knew, was always in danger of becoming Protestant. Some low church Anglicans actually CALLED themselves Protestants. They didn't just 'not believe' in the Real Presence and Confession and the Marian dogmas—they actively taught against those things. And some Anglicans were even charismatic. I remember the first time I saw an Episcopalian put her hands in the air during Sunday worship: I felt like I was watching a dog walk on its hind legs. I had never seen such a thing.

But I knew the joke was on all these people, because we Anglicans were Catholic whether any of them believed it or not, whether they LIKED it or not. The Romans didn't like it either, but it didn't change the fact. The pope could say whatever he wanted: I knew that we Anglicans were Catholic.

So I went to seminary in 1994, full of the Branch Theory and confident in my right to be called a Catholic. (I should hasten to say here that I never actually heard the Branch Theory espoused at St. Mary's, though I have no doubt that some people there believed it—or at least some version of it. St. Mary's, by the time I got there, was very much in the liberal theological camp. Many of the leading members of the parish were quite open in their disbelief of all the major tenets of the Creed. That bothered me, but only as much as those Roman Catholics and Low Church Anglicans bothered me: I got around them because I knew that the Anglican Church was Catholic, even if liberal Anglicans didn't seem to care.)

So, as I said, I got to seminary, and one of the first things I was taught in my theology class was that Anglicanism really only has two mandatory doctrines: the first is the Incarnation—the belief that God the Son came down to earth and took on human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; and the second is the Trinity—the belief that God is Three

Persons in One Substance: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I was told that those were the only two things that were definitively taught in Anglicanism.

And that seemed reasonable to me. Because another part of the Branch Theory is that, where Canterbury is silent—where Anglicanism hasn't developed a specific teaching—her doctrine must be taken to be that of the rest of the Catholic Church. Anglicanism has never said, for example, that Mary WASN'T assumed body and soul into Heaven; therefore, we should assume that Anglicanism teaches the Assumption, at least implicitly. What that means according to Anglo-Catholics is that the Anglican Church has never really NEEDED to define its own teachings, because it assumes its teachings are those of the rest of the Church Catholic.

That was great. And practically speaking, it meant that I could continue to believe in any of the doctrines and participate in any of the devotions I wanted, and know that I had the tacit—if not explicit—approval of my own Communion. If I wanted to genuflect toward the Sacrament and believe in Transubstantiation (and I did), then I could do that, because there was nothing binding on me which said that I couldn't. If I wanted to believe that the Virgin Mary was immaculately conceived and preserved from the stain of Original Sin (and I did), then I could do that, because there was nothing binding on me which said that I couldn't. The only things binding on me were the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, and those were part-and-parcel of being a Catholic anyway; so they were no problem.

So I bellied up to the great Catholic smorgasbord and helped myself to all of the things I really liked: I said the daily office; I prayed the rosary; I attended Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. And when I graduated from seminary and was ordained, I wore a black cassock and a Roman collar (not the jam-pot collars that so many Anglicans wear: I wore the tab, so I would look more like a Roman Catholic), and I called myself "Father Matt," and I celebrated the Marian feast days, and I was in contact with all sorts of Anglican monks and nuns, and so on. I pretty much looked like a Catholic, and I pretty much believed like a Catholic, even up to believing a sort of simplified version of papal infallibility. I was, as the saying goes, "More Roman than Rome."

Now, there were a few places where I definitely diverged from the Catholic consensus, dishes at the smorgasbord I definitely didn't take. For example, I didn't believe that only men should be ordained priests. I very much believed in women's ordination. And I also thought the Church should give communion to divorced people and allow divorced people to remarry in the Church. Fortunately, the Episcopal Church also believed in those things, so I had no conflict. So it would be false to say that I believed EVERYTHING the Roman Catholic Church taught. But for the most part, I played a good game of 'more Catholic than thou,' even to the point of shaming some of my friends over how much I knew about saints and liturgical paraphernalia and things like that.

What it Means to be Catholic

But obviously, that couldn't continue for very long. It doesn't take long before one starts to realize that an Anglo-Catholic is a contradiction in terms. Either one is Catholic or one is not—there's no such thing as a half-Catholic, or a three-quarters Catholic, or even

a ninety-five percent Catholic. You either accept the whole thing, in which case you are a Catholic (that's the meaning of the word 'Catholic:' whole), or you accept only part of it, in which case you are a Protestant (that's the meaning of the word 'protestant:' you protest: you object to something).

One of the first problems I encountered was a growing suspicion that we in the Episcopal Church were using the word 'Catholic' itself in a way no one else in the world seemed to use it.

You know, I'm sure, that it's not unusual to hear an Episcopalian say, "Oh they're very Catholic at St. Mary's." And we all know what that means: they use incense. They like candles. Maybe they say the rosary during Lent. It doesn't necessarily mean anything about the types of doctrines they hold; it's mostly a liturgical comment. Someone will say, "I'm very Catholic," or "I'm not very Catholic at all." They say, "That's a real Catholic diocese," or "That looks very Catholic to me," and everybody nods, because they understand that what is meant is something external: since Anglicanism has no distinctive doctrines, the way to tell if someone is a Catholic is by how they dress and how they act and what they do on Sunday.

But I ask you: what kind of Catholicism is it when one parish is held to be Catholic and another is not, based mostly on the type of liturgy they serve? Doesn't that just evacuate the word of all meaning? Doesn't it basically relegate Catholicism to window-dressing? And yet, that's not what I saw when I looked at the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox. There, one diocese was just as Catholic as another, even if they had Latin masses in one and gospel masses in another.

To make matters even more complicated, there are degrees of Catholicism amongst Anglo-Catholics. So we used to say that So-and-so was 'pretty Catholic' and another was 'very Catholic' and a third was 'only a little Catholic.' We Anglo-Catholics actually disagreed among ourselves as to what makes a person 'truly Catholic.' I mean, if, as I was taught, Episcopalians are Catholic because they adhere to the scriptures and the creeds and have bishops, priests, and deacons, shouldn't ALL EPISCOPALIANS call themselves Catholic? I began to notice that you never hear Roman Catholics grade each other in this fashion. You never hear the people at St. Paul's say that the people at Prince of Peace are 'very Catholic' or 'not very Catholic.' They are all simply Catholics. No one in the Roman Catholic Church is counted more Catholic than anyone else. But we Anglicans did that; and what's more, we really only meant by that something liturgical. Doctrine didn't really seem to enter into it. A jam-pot wearing low churchman could believe in the Immaculate Conception too, but who would know? Liturgy was the tell-tale sign of a Catholic.

The truth is—and I say this to my shame—when I examined myself, I realized that there was an arrogance on my part in that I delighted to call myself Catholic because I thought of myself as part of an elite. I was one of the few who *truly understood* what Anglicanism was, and all of those other Anglicans and Episcopalians just *didn't*. The low church Anglican didn't. The liberal Anglican didn't. The charismatic Anglican didn't. The broad church Anglican didn't. Only we Anglo-Catholics did. And even among the Anglo-Catholics, some of us were more knowledgeable than others about what Anglicanism really was. I did my best to conform myself to almost everything a Roman

Catholic believed and to look as much like a Roman Catholic as possible, and then looked down on others who didn't.

And there came a point, about three years into my ordained ministry, where I remember looking around at diocesan convention—at our bishop who was so low church we used to joke that he was really an Anglo-Baptist; and at all the different priests and deacons and lay people, most of whom were content to call themselves 'just Episcopalians;' and at the few Anglo-Catholics in our diocese who I was comfortable talking to (but who didn't believe in all the things I believed in and so who weren't as Catholic as me)—and I thought to myself, with a sigh, "I'm the only person in here who *really understands* what Anglicanism is all about. I'm the only person who believes right and worships right and really understands what Anglicanism is."

And then the Holy Spirit poked me in the eye. And he said, "You've created a golden calf."

And he was right. It was true. I had created the Church of Christ in my own image. I believed that the truest expression of Christianity was found in the Anglican Church; and among Anglicans it was found in the Anglo-Catholic wing; and among Anglo-Catholics it was found among those who believed and worshiped as I did. Which basically meant me. I was the measure of Christianity.

The true Church of Christ was about six feet tall, with brown hair and blue eyes, and it believed in using incense at mass and praying the rosary and women priests and married ministers and papal infallibility (when it was convenient to follow it) and Marian teachings and altars against the wall and that priests should always wear their collars out of doors, and, of course, the Incarnation and the Trinity.

And I realized that that couldn't possibly be what Jesus intended. Jesus could not possibly have intended for each man to become his own arbiter of what was and wasn't Catholic. Jesus could not have possibly intended for each man to become his own pope.

First of all, everyone in the room that day—and they ran the whole gamut from arch-conservative to arch-liberal, from snake-belly low to steeple-cross high—believed they were legitimate Anglicans. If I had gone around the room to question them on their beliefs, I really had no place to tell them they were wrong. Anglicanism has no version of the Magisterium; it has no Book of Concord; it has no Westminster Confession to tell you what an Anglican does or doesn't believe. So there was no way I could say to another Anglican—even an Anglo-Baptist—that he wasn't a REAL Anglican. Technically, as I had been taught in seminary, if he or she claimed to believe in the Incarnation and the Trinity, that made them an Anglican. Each of those people was just as Anglican as me: who was I to say that they weren't? I realized I didn't have a leg to stand on.

In the end, my Anglo-Catholicism came down to a matter of personal preferences at the big smorgasbord. I *preferred* to believe that Mary was conceived immaculately. But if the priest in the neighboring parish taught the exact opposite of that—well then, that was *his preference too*. It seemed to me that Catholicism—real Catholicism—had to be more than just a man's personal preference. Because either Mary *was* conceived immaculately or she *wasn't*. Either the pope *is* infallible or he's *not*. Either Jesus *is* physically present in the Sacrament or he *isn't*. It's either one or the other. Preference doesn't enter into it. Who

cares what my preference is? I might prefer that $2+2=5$, but my wanting it won't make it so.

And yet, here I was saying that something was right and true simply because I had DECIDED it was right and true.

Second of all, I used to sprinkle my sermons with little phrases like, "as the Catholic Church has always taught," and "as we Catholics have always believed." When my parishioners would press me on what I meant by that, I would tell them that I was not referring to the Roman Catholic Church, but to a larger Catholic body of which the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church and the Orthodox Church and maybe even the Protestant churches were only parts. But beyond that, I myself wasn't sure what I meant. What was this Catholic Church I kept referring to? If pressed, I would have said that it was simply the 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church' we referred to in the creeds.

But here's the rub: in concrete terms, no such entity exists. There is no institution bearing the name the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. You cannot go into a town and find there the First 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic' Church of Joplin, Missouri. The Catholic Church to which we Anglo-Catholics so frequently referred does not in fact have any concrete, universally recognized existence. We were defining Catholicism in our own way. And, I should add, a way that was to our own advantage.

And this 'defining things in our way' brought me to a third realization (which really, from an eternal standpoint, is the most important): I realized that a church only as big as me—which believed only the thing I found plausible or likely, which required of me only the things I felt like doing, which worshiped only in the way I found personally inspiring—was not a church that could help me become a saint. A church that comfortable will never stretch me, will never tell me anything I don't truly want to hear, will never smooth down my rough edges, will never give me any cross other than the ones I've already decided I want to carry. And in the end, a cross I *want* isn't really a cross *at all*.

Now, a person might say—objectively speaking—that I believed most of what the Roman Catholic Church taught, and I did most of what the Catholic Church required, so I could hardly say that it was all about me. And they'd be right, in a way. But the truth is: it *was* all about me ... because I believed those things and did those things because I wanted to, not because I had to. There was no authority saying to me, "This is truth, and this is what you need for your soul's health." There was simply my aesthetic taste and my choice to believe certain things because they made sense to me—and (let's be honest here) because they set me apart—and my desire to be Catholic on my own terms.

Cafeteria Catholicism

Now, I've done a lot of talking about *myself* here, but I do so because I find this to be a common problem for Anglicans entering the Catholic Church. We are so used to being Catholic on our own terms that it's a bit of a stretch when we realize that we must start being Catholic on the Church's terms. Part of what it means to 'believe with the Church' is that the Church sets the agenda, not us. The Church determines what is and what is not 'faithful Catholic living.' The Church teaches us; we do not teach the Church.

We've heard a lot in the last several years—during the pontificates of the Servant of God John Paul II and His Holiness Benedict XVI—about 'cafeteria Catholics.' Cafeteria Catholics are people who pick and choose among the Church's doctrines and laws and practices like that guy at the buffet table. "Ooh, yes, I'll have a little Me & Jesus. Give me a dollop of Mary please, but not too much. Oh, and definitely some Sunday Mass; I love Communion." But, "Oh, no thank you: I don't care for sin and judgment—it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. No confession, thanks, not until my deathbed (and maybe not even then). No Purgatory: I never saw the point."

For good or for ill, Anglicans are encouraged to think like that. "You want to believe in the Immaculate Conception? Go ahead!" "You want to believe in double predestination? Go ahead." "You want to believe in transubstantiation, or consubstantiation, or memorialism, or transvaluation? Go ahead: you decide for yourself." Anglicanism lets you invent your own Christianity, which is part of the fun of being an Anglican. And the idea behind it is that we shouldn't unchurch each other just because we have all different ideas. That sort of generosity is something I've always loved about Anglicanism. It's still one of the most attractive things about the Anglican tradition.

But in the end, it leaves us defenseless to any lame-brained idea that comes down the pike. *Of course* there's no reason to be ungenerous. We shouldn't unchurch each other when someone says $2+2=5$ either, but that doesn't change the fact that $2+2$ doesn't equal 5, that it equals 4 and always will. Being generous doesn't mean that all opinions are equally valid and that there's nothing we can point to and say, "That's true."

We need to give up that kind of smorgasbord thinking when we enter the Catholic Church. Either you are a Catholic or you are not. When we enter the Catholic Church, we are no longer the measure of truth.

As Catholics, we believe *with* the Church, not against it.

Now, does that mean we must set our brain aside when we walk through the door? No, but people sometimes make it sound like that. Sometimes I hear people talk about the Catholic Church like it's some sort of cult or Fascist group where we all wear brown jackboots and chant slogans and stop thinking for ourselves. That has certainly never been my experience. As a matter of fact, my own intellectual and devotional life has never been more alive than it has been since entering the Catholic Church. And that's because I'm no longer teaching the Church. I'm letting her teach me now. I'm her student, she's not mine. And I realize that Christianity is a lot bigger than me.

If you want to invent your own Christianity, do not become Catholic. If you want to teach the Church rather than let the Church teach you, do not become Catholic. If you want to have the forms of Catholicism while remaining a Protestant, do not become Catholic. There are plenty of other churches out there that present do-it-yourself theologies and smorgasbord moralities and opportunities to dress up in robes and light candles and burn incense.

The only honest reason to become Catholic is if you believe the Church's claim to be the Body of Christ. The only honest reason to become Catholic is because you want the 'whole truth' about who Jesus is and what he wants.

Thank you very much.