

## Commentary: The “Secret” Sacrament of the Archbishop of Canterbury

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1/25/2008

Catholic Online

An on-going story revolving around the activities of the Archbishop of Canterbury will not go away quietly. At the end of November the archbishop presided at a secret Eucharistic service with a group of homosexual Anglicans in London. While the event did, in fact, take place, it really wasn't much of a secret, it upset many church leaders within Anglicanism, and it points to a fatal flaw.

WASHINGTON (Catholic Online) – Since September rumors had been flying around England of a secret Communion service scheduled to be held at St. Peter's, Eaton Square, for homosexual, lesbian, bisexual and transgender clergy and their partners with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, presiding.

A September 18, 2007 article in The Times Online even carried the title of his sermon, “Present realities and future possibilities for lesbians and gay men in the Church”.

The service, part of a larger venue, was held November 29, 2007 in All Hallows by the Tower Church, in London, after the original location, St Peter's Church in Belgravia, was "outed" on the Church Society website. The move was intended to be a way to avoid media attention.

The gathering was organized by the Clergy Consultation, a support group for gay clergy, ordinands and Anglican monks and nuns. The consultation, actually called the Lesbian and Gay Clergy Consultation, began in 1976 by three Anglican priests as a support network for gay clergy.

Membership throughout United Kingdom has varied between 250 and 450 people. The group meets semi-annually for a presentation, discussion, worship and a meal.

According to The Times, secrecy was so tight that a list of those attending was to be shredded after being reviewed by Dr. Williams.

A spokeswoman for the Archbishop stated: “The Archbishop of Canterbury is committed to the listening process which was agreed at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 as part of the discussions on human sexuality. That means listening to and engaging with gay and lesbian clergy in a pastorally sensitive setting.”

The actions of the Archbishop of Canterbury raise the question of how far he will go, how much protocol he will breach, and how much Christian teaching he will ignore for the sake of denominational unity.

Of major concern to Church officials is the essential teachings of the Christian faith with relationship to the Eucharist. Christopher Sugden, Executive Secretary of Anglican Mainstream, an evangelical movement within the Anglican Church was alarmed about a service "... with the call for people to repent of their sins and live a new life with those who clearly have no intention of changing their behaviour."

The Rev Rod Thomas, chairman of the Church of England's influential Reform grouping, said: "There are two issues here - one is whether the Archbishop should have presided at this service in the first place.

"The fact he did was quite provocative for those that hold to a biblical position on homosexuality.

"I think it has been his desire to try to accommodate both sides of this debate that has led to the current break-up of the Anglican church. It has actually increased the sense of indiscipline.

"As far as consulting the Bishop, I think the norm is that you do, but if this had been an uncontroversial issue then nobody would have started questioning whether or not he had broken canon law."

A second concern involved the ignoring of protocol, as the Bishop of London was not notified of a church activity taking place within his jurisdiction.

The Times emailed the Dr. Williams' predecessor, Lord George Carey, and asked if such a thing would have happened in his day. He replied, "I am sure that Rowan was acting for the very best of reasons viz. to show that he cares for all and wishes to hold minorities in the church.

"What would I have done? I would not have agreed to a private Eucharist; after all, the Eucharist, by definition, is open to all Christians. I am surprised to hear that the Bishop of London's permission was not sought. Check your facts. If that is so then it is a failure of courtesy but it could be a staff member's fault! Happy Christmas".

Sudgen stated, "'It is an embarrassment to the Bishop of London who had previously told his synod it would not be taking place at St Peter's Church. When it took place elsewhere, it looked as if he had been withholding information."

Canon law of the Anglican Church declares that "every bishop is within his diocese, the principal master, and to him belongs the right...of ordering, controlling and authorising all services in churches". From this standpoint, the Archbishop may be found even in violation of church law.

Yet, another section allows ministers to invite a "priest or deacon" to serve in their church for up to seven days without telling the bishop, which may give Dr. Williams canonical permission for his actions.

Lambeth Palace stated that the Archbishop did not have to inform the Bishop since the invitation to participate involved a group not a parish.

However one wants to interpret Canon Law or exceptions to protocol, the issue still comes down to good manners, where the one who stands as the honorary head of the church should also serve as the highest example of proper ecclesiastical etiquette.

Even those encouraging the dialog were not all delighted with the idea of a clandestine gathering. Revered Richard Kirker, of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, criticized Dr Williams for trying to hold a Communion service in secret.

"We are astonished at the attempts to make the meeting clandestine when it would be far better to have this in the open," Rev. Kirker declared. "The fact that he wants to go there without anyone knowing he's going there makes it quite clear that he has an attitude towards the event that he doesn't have at any other meetings."

Special treatment seems to have increased sensitivity on both sides of the sexuality issue.

"The fact he did was quite provocative for those that hold to a biblical position on homosexuality," stated The Rev Rod Thomas, chairman of the Church of England's Reform grouping, a conservative Anglican assembly. "I think it has been his desire to try to accommodate both sides of this debate that has led to the current break-up of the Anglican Church. It has actually increased the sense of indiscipline."

Part of the problem with Dr. Williams approach to schism is the way in which he is trying to be the only point of unity between the factions in tension. As long as each faction of the church can have relationship with him, he feels unity can be achieved.

The problem is much greater than just a relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury as a person. While the Anglican Communion qualifies its members by their relationship with Canterbury, that relationship has been historically built upon the faithfulness of Canterbury to Christian faith as it has been understood within Protestant Anglicanism.

It is this fundamental understanding of the Christian faith which is said to be incarnate within the honorary position of the Archbishop and Lambeth Palace. Over the past quarter to half-century the battle for the fundamentals of this expression of faith has been in contention.

Most recently issues like women's ordination and human sexuality have become the foci for battles within local parishes and dioceses in many Anglican jurisdictions. In America, the consecration of an openly gay bishop, which included participation by his partner,

brought the matter of sexuality – and homosexuality in particular – to the forefront.

On the one hand, the Anglican Communion has been dealing with the Episcopal Church U.S.A., the official branch of Anglicanism in the United States, in a punitive way concerning this issue, the words and actions of their senior bishop seem to run at cross purposes.

Dom Gregory Dix, the famous Anglican theologian, stated in his essay on the Episcopate in the early church that a bishop has a two-fold responsibility, to stand for God to the church and to stand for the church to God. Both of these dynamics position the bishop as the active and accountable concerning the orthodoxy of his jurisdiction.

All too often bishops have been seen – and probably have viewed themselves – as church officials whose responsibilities are temporal rather than spiritual. Former Bishop of Oxford, The Right Reverend Dr. Kenneth Kirk, offered that observation in writing “The Apostolic Ministry.”

It would seem that the Church of England may find itself working so hard to appease its spurious factions that she loses sight of why the Church exists in the first place. Some may argue that this is already the case in at least a portion of the Communion.

Of this, or any church, a bishop is called to be the defender of the faith, whose work it is to bring the faithful into a proper relationship with Jesus Christ and to be a teacher of that faith, as it has been passed down from our Lord and His Apostles in Scripture and tradition.

In the Anglican Order for Holy Communion, 1948, the following invitation was given prior to offering the General Confession: “You that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins and offences committed to Almighty God, and be in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, and heartily to follow the commandments of God, and to walk from henceforth in his holy ways; draw near, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort, make your humble Confession to Almighty God, and to his holy Church, here gathered together in his Name, meekly kneeling upon your knees.”

It would seem that now is a good time for the Communion to reflect upon the words of their own liturgy, to repent and return to the work of faith.