

Reflections on General Convention by the Rev. Steve Zimmerman.

The General Convention in Minneapolis in August, 2003 has stirred more controversy than any since the last convention in Minneapolis, which authorized the ordination of women, in 1976. So much has been written and spoken about the confirmation of Fr. Gene Robinson to be bishop of New Hampshire both in the Church, and in the secular media that there is probably nothing left to say on the issue itself.

I have been involved in two Episcopal elections, one in this diocese, and one in the diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. I experienced both to be deeply spiritual processes of discernment on the part of all who were involved. Candidates, as well as convention delegates and the wider community of the diocese prayerfully sought God's will. I am moreover convinced that in each election, the man God had chosen to lead the diocese was elected. I was also nominated to be Bishop of New Hampshire. I chose not to stand for election in New Hampshire, which makes it awkward for me to criticize the choice New Hampshire Episcopalians made in the election of their bishop.

Yet, I can be among the first to say we all owe Bishop Frade not only our allegiance, but our gratitude. We can be proud of the prayerful, conscientious manner in which he approached his choice, and in the openness with which he has shared his personal struggle in arriving at his decision. We can be grateful that he initially intended to abstain from the vote, in order to spare any of us any pain. And we can be proud that when he became convinced of the need to vote, that he voted his conscience, in spite of the cost. Such prayerful, conscientious, and courageous action is exactly the leadership we expect, but do not always get from our leaders.

Secondly, I would like to address those who are unhappy with the judgment that Bishop Frade and a majority of bishops and delegates made. I share many of your concerns, and indeed I would have voted in the minority. But I freely admit, I may have been wrong to do so. More than twenty years as a priest, and several years as a member of the Bishop's Council on Sexuality has taught me that when it comes to issues of sex, we see through a glass, very darkly. I would urge a little humility, as we face the days ahead.

I am of course saddened when anyone discovers that they can not be an Episcopalian. My view of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is that the Anglican Communion is only one branch of the Church. I must therefore support anyone who feels called to another branch, even though I am too much of an Anglican chauvinist to ever believe that they have made the best choice. Deep down in my heart, I really believe everyone should be an Episcopalian.

I wonder though, where will they go? Do they imagine that the Episcopal Church is the only Church in Christendom that is struggling with issues of sexuality? Would they exchange the open debate of Minneapolis for lectures on morality in the Church by the Bishop of Rome? Or would they really prefer a Church of like-minded members, even if it claims to be a 'moral majority'?

Some have appealed to the Anglican Communion, even to African bishops to reverse the decision of our convention. Do they suppose that the African Church is such a pure

expression of faith and orthodoxy that they do not have their own struggles and temptations? Have they forgotten that a bishop been accused of complicity in genocide in Rwanda, or that some African bishops argue for polygamy?

I am most troubled by those Episcopalians who decide to protest the action of the elected bishops and delegates of the Church by withholding their pledge of support to the Church. Why would anyone do this? Whatever may be said about those who voted with the majority, I am certain that no one of them cast their vote with the intention of hurting the Church. Can the same be said of those who would withhold their support?

If on the other hand, the intention of withholding support is intended to bring pressure on the Church to change its direction, I believe this is an insult to all of us on both sides of the issue. For it implies that we hold the views we do out of expediency, and can be bought off. No one offers another a bribe, unless they believe the one being bribed is dishonest enough to consider it.

Or, is it that some are withholding their support, because they believe the Convention has departed from the true interpretation of the scriptures? Certainly, there are laws and passages of scripture to support every position in this debate. But if the laws of scripture are to be our only guide, do those who would withhold their pledge not know that they are robbing God, according to the Book of Malachi? Do they not know that to break any law is to break the whole law? The truth is that our offering of our time, talent and treasure to God, as the tithe of our life and labor to the Lord, is the way we show that we accept the New Covenant that is offered to us in the Body and Blood of Christ. To withhold that offering is to be cut off from the sacrifice of Christ, and to become strangers and aliens once more.

Or, can it be only that they intend only to protest the decision of the Convention, because they did not like the outcome of the vote? This may be the most immediately serious issue of all for us, as Episcopalians. The genius of Anglicanism has never rested in absolutist claims we have made for the infallibility of the Church. Nor has it been in making authoritarian claims for the inerrancy of the scriptures in matters of social law and morality.

The genius of Anglicanism has been our faith that the final arbiter of moral decision making is the Risen Christ, who is the “firstborn of all creation, the head of the Church, and the author of our salvation.” We have always believed that we are not just people of a book, but of a risen Lord, and that the Holy Spirit was given not just to the authors of the scriptures, or to the hierarchy of the Church, but to every Christian in Baptism. We have believed that the Holy Spirit confirms the faith of each Christian within the community of the Church, and that every Christian is called to exercise the moral choice of conscience within the community of the Church. We have always believed that the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, best discerns the mind of Christ in prayer, informed by scripture and tradition, as a community. A result of this faith has been democracy, which emerged in England, and not in Rome, Germany, Geneva, Salem, or Spain.

For that reason, we meet in conventions to decide important issues. Our Church has public debates like the one in Minneapolis, because we can. We do not receive directives from a Pope. Nor is every individual pastor, or congregation, his own master. We believe this process is truly scriptural, as can be seen in the story in Acts 15 of the council of

Jerusalem, and we believe it is in accord with the most ancient and historical traditions of the Church, as in the great councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. In Minneapolis, the bishops and delegates were asked to confirm the election of a duly constituted convention of the Diocese of New Hampshire.

A corollary of this faith has been the unapologetic acknowledgement that this side of the Second Coming of Christ, we must walk by faith, and not by sight. For we see through a glass darkly within the ambiguity of experience. Our life is a journey of faith within the Church, in which we must work out our own salvation, with fear and trembling. For it does not yet appear what we shall be. We only know that we shall be like Him, who died and rose again for us.

A cornerstone of our faith in democracy is the social covenant, by which each member of the community agrees to abide by the decisions of the majority, or of duly elected delegates. To refuse to support the Church, because duly elected representatives of the Church arrived at a decision which displeases us calls into question our faith that the Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of the Life of the Church.

Nor could such doubts arise at a worse time in history. At just the moment when individual rights and democratic process are being challenged by absolutist religious zealots around the world, we need more than ever to demonstrate our faith in the democratic process as a beacon of faith and hope to the world.

Finally, can they who acknowledge the grace of Christ, not forgive? Even if the decision made in Minneapolis is proven to be in error, those charged with discerning the mind of Christ acted prayerfully, faithfully, and in accordance with their sense of God's calling to the Church at this time. Can we not forgive them, if they did not see as clearly the mind of Christ as those who were in the minority might have seen it? Let them sound a prophetic call. Let them wait upon the Lord for his judgment. In the meantime, between Minneapolis and the Day when all shall be revealed, let us walk in love, as Christ loved us. This, too, is a scriptural commandment of the Lord. It may be that all God requires of any of us is not that we are always right, but that we seek to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.