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Once a Bishop, Always a Bishop

Ordination confers an indelible character whose authenticity doesn't depend upon the canons.

By John Heidt

What is going to happen to the Bishop of San Joaquin now that the Presiding Bishop has decided that by becoming affiliated with the Province of the Southern Cone he should be deposed for "abandoning the communion of this church" [TLC, Feb. 3]? What about the bishops of those other dioceses that may do the same? Does that mean that they will no longer be bishops, unable to confirm your children or ordain your laity to the diaconate or priesthood? Will they no longer be able to bless you and absolve you from your sins, or celebrate the Holy Eucharist?

These bishops certainly won't be able to do these things in The Episcopal Church (TEC). Like any religious society, TEC has the right and ability to decide who its clergy are and what they can do, including who it recognizes as its bishops. But those bishops whom it does not recognize will still be bishops, because they were not ordained bishops of The Episcopal Church but of the whole Catholic Church throughout the world.

Every bishop's certificate of consecration begins with these awesome words: "To all the faithful in Christ Jesus throughout the world, greetings," and then proclaims to the world that a duly ordained priest has been ordained and consecrated "into the sacred office of a bishop in the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of God," according to the prescribed order of The Episcopal Church and in conformity with its canons.

They are ordained in conformity with the canons of The Episcopal Church, but the authenticity of their orders does not depend upon those canons. The divisions within catholic Christendom must not trap us into believing that The Episcopal Church has absolute and universal authority either by constituting the whole church of God, or by being a totally self-governing denomination. Our bishops ordain other bishops according to the rules of The Episcopal Church, but they do so as apostolic representatives of the whole Catholic Church throughout the world. And those they ordain, though specifically authorized to function in The Episcopal Church, are likewise ordained bishops of that same Catholic Church.

Once a bishop, always a bishop. What has been done can never be undone.

The Church of England's Canon C.1, sec.2, explicitly agrees with the rest of Catholic tradition in this regard: "No person who has been admitted to the order of bishop, priest, or deacon can ever be divested of the character of his order," though he may be deprived or deposed from exercising it. The Episcopal Church accepts the same principle in practice by providing for the restoration of someone under the discipline of suspension, inhibition, or deposition without requiring re-ordination (Canon IV.13). Like baptism and confirmation, ordination seals someone permanently with the seal of the Holy Spirit, or to use similar language common in Western theology and in our Anglican formularies, it confers an indelible character.

Commenting on John 17:19, Andre Feuillet points out, "The consecration the apostles receive marks them forever; a merely temporary consecration would not really assimilate a man to the eternal priest of the new covenant." This he suggests is the meaning of John's phrase "consecration in truth," as distinguished from the temporary institutions of the Old Testament (*The Priesthood of Christ and His Ministers*, Doubleday and Co., 1975, pp. 125-6).

Referring to St. Paul (Rom. 11:29 and 2 Tim. 2:13), Max Thurian points out that the "gifts and choice of God are irreversible ... God is faithful despite the possible infidelities of His ministers." And he adds: "Christian tradition is fully justified in holding the pastoral ministry to be a lifelong commitment and in speaking of the permanent character given the minister at his ordination" (*Priesthood and Ministry*, Taize, 1970, p. 256).

If a bishop is deposed for "abandoning the communion of this church," then "this church" must surely refer to our particular province over which we have a rightful control, and not to any other provinces of the Catholic Church for which he was also ordained. Is that perhaps why the Presiding Bishop does not seem to be bothered that Bishop Jeffrey Steenson and others are "abandoning the communion of this church" for the Roman Catholic Church, but seems very upset about bishops and parishes "abandoning the communion of this church" for some other province in the Anglican Communion, even so far as being willing to sell our property to Roman Catholics or Methodists or anyone else except Anglicans?

Surely she does not believe that our particular province can control the whole Anglican Communion. Perhaps she is just suffering from pangs of nostalgia, harking back to those relatively peaceful days when we could count on the Roman church to refuse to accept any of our bishops as true apostolic bishops and the Anglican Communion accepting both the ordinations and depositions of every bishop in every particular province. But those days are gone forever now that we have gone ahead and ordained bishops that many Anglican provinces could not accept, either because they are women or, more recently, because he is a practicing homosexual.

The Presiding Bishop cannot have it both ways. Either she must step down because other Anglican provinces such as the Southern Cone cannot accept her as a bishop, or else she must face the fact that all other provinces are free to

accept or reject as bishops in good standing every bishop ordained by TEC even if TEC should depose them.

The Bishop of San Joaquin or any other bishop placed under inhibition or deposition will still remain a bishop. And there is nothing schismatic or uncooperative or even un-Anglican for the people of their dioceses or for any foreign province to accept their episcopal ministrations, even if TEC cannot.

Bishops under discipline in TEC should be “released” from the exercise of their orders rather than treated as though they have been deprived of them. We need a time of jubilee, not of recrimination, in which our national province stops using canon laws to enslave clergy and lay people in new doctrinal positions they cannot accept. Instead of crying out “peace, peace, when there is no peace,” let us cry out to our mitered pharaohs, “In the name of Christ and of His Church, ‘Let my people go!’”

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