

BKS
BIO

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President of the House of Deputies
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We come now to the end of the Report. For the past three years and especially during the last 18 months the Executive Council has concentrated upon two-way communication with members of the Church.

So there is the Gray Workbook, and the Blue Book and the Blue Book supplement, and the Yellow Book and the Yellow Book supplement. There have been Executive Council reports, committee reports, commission reports, interest group reports, pressure group reports. What an outpouring of words to help God get on with his work!

When the great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, who wrote and published volumes of Dogmatic theology throughout his professional career, recognized that his life was drawing to a close, he wrote concerning his prodigious theological efforts:

"The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh, they say to one another, 'Look! Here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the Dogmatics.'" (Hyers, p. 226)

"Well, dear angels of God, here we come now with our little pushcart full of Books, Reports, Memorials and Resolutions, Petitions and Pamphlets. Please keep an eye on us so we don't take ourselves too seriously." Our Mission - Yes. Ourselves - No.

We have different points of view upon many matters of critical importance; we are quite different people from different parts of the country and the world. But we have one thing in common: we are all here because we love the Church - ultimately of course the great, holy catholic Church, the mystical Body of Christ of which we are the members and he is our Head.

But at the moment I am talking specifically about our love for this Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. I am asking you to think at the outset very simply about the church we know most intimately: that institutional church which has nourished us, given us hope; annoyed us, frustrated us and made us angry; helped us to know we are forgiven and reconciled to one another; given us the sacraments of grace and lifted us to see our home in heaven.

I am pointing first to our own parish churches, their musty smell, and red carpets, with dead leaves never quite picked off, the red and blue Victorian windows, the search every fall for Church School teachers and the noise of the Church School pupils, the impossible music, the creaky voices, and the irascible organist, the head of the Altar Guild and the head of the Women of the Church, both speaking to each other, and their amazing devotion, faithful service and undying sacrifice; the interminable Vestry meetings and their obsession with budgets; the knitting groups, sewing groups and prayer groups, the children in the Primary class locked in the bathroom, kicking the doors during the Quiet of Communion, and the smell of the gym after Holy Rosary has beaten Holy Trinity; of the joyous celebration when a new Rector is installed (and sometimes even happier celebration when he leaves).

I am pointing to Hymn Books and Prayer Books, Green Books and countless Special Services mimeographed on hideous paper that is crumpled and torn, leaves stains on our hands and looks just like our church life sometimes. We are confused with the journeys of the altar travelling from east to west and back again, sometimes settling for a rest in the center of the church so that one day we celebrate facing each other and the following week we face the Rose Window and the next week the choir. One day we gaze at the face of the priest and the next at his back - and neither guarantees to elevate our spirit or prompt holy thoughts of God.

In our honest moments we confess that we make no great impact upon our communities. If our church disappeared the community, the city would go on all right. We usually are more concerned about keeping our members even if they have to drive 20 miles a Sunday than we are about the kids around the corner who might come in every day. We are parochial, all right - both in the best sense of that word and the worst.

Yet this weak, battered, somewhat limited, sometimes sad parish church is where we were made members of Christ, where we take one another until death parts us, and where we commit unto the safe-keeping of God's eternal love those whom we love. It grounds us in Reality and says that Reality is God.

It's a real mish-mash. There is no crystal clear purity, quite a lot of darkness - shot through with grace. It is in those parish relationships where we have seen bitterness give way to gentleness, have had our sorrows turned into joy, have experienced pain transformed into power. Out of the depths of our hearts we have sung of the glory of God, and the songs of heaven have echoed in our church and in our hearts. We have known that no matter what, God is God - we are safe in him and he wants us to count as Christian people in his world. That is why we are here: our love for this church with all its imperfections.

That our church should leave so much to be desired should not surprise us - for so do we. Its imperfections are there because we are imperfect. We are pretty temperate in our faith; we do not convert many people; we don't care too much about those people outside, especially if they are different in color or language or social standing. We have plenty of darkness in our hearts - right here in those same hearts that love the church.

So if we are to think intelligently about the Church, we don't begin with the national Church, we don't even begin with our local churches. We begin with ourselves. We are all of a piece. Division in the National Church does no more

than reflect the division in the diocesan church, division in the parish church and division in our hearts - just as our love for the Church is a reflection of our love for our bishops, dioceses, our clergy and parishes, our neighbors and ourselves.

What it comes down to is this: our moving toward unity and with a new sense of purpose within each of us. The Church is a Person - Christ - made up of persons, and the wholeness and direction of his life in the world is bound completely to the wholeness and direction of our lives in the world. The power of his Mission is determined by the power of our personal lives in our homes and communities and jobs and churches.

Therefore we set things in the wrong perspective if we think of setting one group over against another group - of personal evangelism, for example, over against social concern. Or, to use another example, if we think that by tinkering with the structure of the Church we can make new structures the ark of salvation rather than Christ himself.

Or again - we talk about getting the Church "back on the track" as though just getting together, sitting on the track, were an end in itself. Once back (if it was ever off, which I doubt - just a few ties got jostled loose), where is it going and where does the motive power come from? Who gets up the steam?

What is its Mission? Sometimes we talk as though Mission was our giving something we have inside to those people outside who do not have what we have - money or power or education or health or housing or our liturgy or the Good News.

Mission may include all of these in different ways in different times but our essential Mission and the only one that counts for anything is our obedience to God. All else follows from that. The steam for Mission rises from personal commitment to Christ and then quiet, persistent obedience to him.

This cannot be done by Conventions - national or diocesan - not even by parish meetings. It begins - you know it and I know it - in the recesses of our heart. The Church becomes whole as we become whole - that is, as we acknowledge, accept and try not to hide the darkness within us, the demons that are there and the delight we have sometimes in evil.

This moving from darkness into light, from division into wholeness, from brokenness into healing is what Paul was referring to in the Epistle yesterday - an Epistle chosen because it is talking about Mission - when he said, "He is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace. . . ."

This is an affirmation that the way toward unity is found as we begin with a recognition and acceptance of our dis-unity - both inner and outer. As persons we have within us a dark side as well as a bright side.

Different, divided sides of one's nature are not meant to be denied. They are meant to be transformed. The transformation is not something that we do. It is what Christ does.

So the recognition of ourselves as we are is to begin to be transformed, to be made whole, to be at one with Christ. Then we can live as we are meant to live, become who we are meant to become.

This is true not only in our personal lives but in our parish lives. Healing occurs when there is acknowledgement and acceptance of differences, the giving and receiving of forgiveness, the opening of ourselves to his redeeming grace. That is why we love our parishes and why when we think of the Church we think primarily of those personal Christian relationships.

As we have known some greatness and glory in our personal lives and in our parish life, so can we know greatness and glory in our national church life. Who can tell to what greatness our Church is called? At the very best it is the Church

which can call the nations back to touch once again the resources of the spirit which have made her great. It is the Church which should lead the nation against accepting corruption as a way of life in American society, against the easy acceptance of moral neutrality on issues that affect the destiny of the peoples of the world. It is the Church which can hold high the images of nobility and integrity and help them become realities of our social order when men and women may without fear care for another because they hold a common Father in high and holy regard.

Our outer vision rises from our inner one. It is the same vision. It is the same in our hearts, in our parishes, in our dioceses and in the National Church. However weak we are as persons as we are being transformed inwardly by Christ, and however feeble our Church may be, it has been chosen by God to be part of the Body of his Son and we members of him, together called to be a transformed Church. The process is the same throughout.

The institutional church is transformed into the Body of Christ as its members affirm their different positions, listen to one another, stay open to one another, see that their unity is in Christ - not in their ideas about Christ, much less in their theological, ecclesiastical or political ideas, nor in their Church programs. When the members therefore affirm him - worship him, listen to him, are willing to be judged by him, to obey him and be renewed by him - they will be - we will be - the Church will be - transformed by him. In our obedience we shall discover what the Mission of the Church is to be. That is the Purpose of this Convention.

So we come before God now with our little pushcart full of reports, resolutions and programs. Let them all be refined by our commitment, not to them, but to Him who is both in them and beyond them, who transcends and transforms us as He transcends and transforms the Church.

As we offer the contents of our pushcart for the work of this Convention we place them at his feet that they may be a proper offering to Him who is not only the Head of the Church but of all mankind. Our allegiance to Him is the only

Mission we have - and that will be our service to the world.

So let us get about it. If we take our Mission seriously, but not ourselves, we shall have a significant Convention. It will be hard work, but it should be fun. It had better be fun - or the angels won't like it.

Let them laugh and let us laugh as we both go about making this Church's business God's business - to his glory. Amen.