

Christian Basics: “...one Catholic and Apostolick Church”

What’s this “catholic” bit? I was brought up to think we’re Protestants.

“Catholic” with a large “C” please – just as Cranmer spells it in his Prayer Book!

But Henry VIII and all that?

Henry declared administrative independence from Rome and set himself up as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. But he was no doctrinal Protestant. Henry was a Catholic theologian and wrote a brilliant criticism of Luther. The Pope awarded him the title Defender of the Faith for this. That’s the *fid def* on British coins.

We sometimes hear sermons and see articles in Anglican churches praising the Pope – even in St Michael’s

Yes, we were delighted and encouraged by Pope John Paul II’s vigorous defence of traditional Christian teaching and now by Pope Benedict’s reaffirmation of this teaching. It is a case of being grateful to the Pope for his orthodoxy – not a case of accepting his administrative authority. Would that Anglican authorities might speak Christian orthodoxy so clearly!

But Latin – we hear Latin prayers sometimes in the Holy Communion?

Quite. Latin was the religious language of English Christians for more than 1000 years. Most people – the mass – didn’t read it, but they knew it by heart and understood what was being said. They loved it. There were huge and sometimes violent demonstrations when it was proposed to do away with Latin. It’s our heritage. So much Christian experience, Christian prayers, Christian theology and Christian devotion was and is in Latin. When we (occasionally) use Latin we are availing ourselves of this rich tradition and expressing our unity and continuity with our Christian forebears.

But the “Hail Mary” – sorry, the “Ave Maria” – that’s very Catholic, isn’t it?

Yes. Catholic means “universal”. The “Ave Maria” is an ancient and universal prayer.

The Protestant churches don’t say it!

No they don’t, do they? But, as I said at the start, the Church of England isn’t a Protestant sect. It’s odd that Protestants don’t pray it. I mean, “Ave Maria” is what the angel Gabriel said to Mary at the Annunciation. That’s in the Bible (*Luke 1:28*) and Protestants are renowned for their love of the Bible.

Ah yes, but the Bible doesn’t go on to ask Mary to pray for us!

No it doesn’t. But Anglicans aren’t biblical fundamentalists. We don’t imagine that God the Holy Ghost stopped revealing His truths when the biblical period came to an end. A defining characteristic of the Church of England is that it is founded on *Scripture, Reason and Tradition*. God’s truth is a progressive revelation.

But “Mother of God”?

Yes, “Mater Dei” – she is, isn’t she? The Mother of Jesus. And Jesus was – as Archbishop Cranmer tells us in his impeccable English – the Son of God.

It’s very Roman

The Romans do love the prayer. I half suspect that’s why the sectarian Protestants hate it so. But Roman Catholics don’t have a monopoly on devotion to Mary. The Eastern Orthodox hold her in great veneration. And those very Anglican divines John Donne and George Herbert were devoted to her – she features a lot in their poems, sermons and essays. Lancelot Andrewes – and you couldn’t get more English than him, could you? - writes beautifully about the Blessed Virgin.

“The Blessed Virgin” – that’s particularly Roman, isn’t it?

The Romans use that title certainly. But so does Cranmer in the Prayer Book and in a big way. It’s Cranmer who entitles her Feast Day “The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary”

You call The Lord’s Supper of the Holy Communion “the Mass”. Don’t tell me that’s not specifically Roman!

All right: that’s not specifically Roman. In his first Prayer Book of 1549, Cranmer says, “The Lord’s Supper, commonly called the Mass”.

What about transubstantiation?

What about it? It’s just one theological way of trying to express what’s inexpressible – the truth that Our Lord is really present in the Blessed Sacrament.

But isn’t the Anglican view that the bread and wine are only symbols?

What do you mean by “only”? A symbol is something that partakes of the reality which it expresses. Our Lord at the Last Supper did not say “This is a symbol of my Body” but “This is my Body”. The Greek of the gospels is quite explicit. That Christ is really present in the consecrated elements is the centre of that ancient Christian tradition we were talking about at the start of this conversation.

Sometimes I think there’s too much stress on externals.

Well, we don’t go in for any limp-wristed showiness and high camp in the worship at St Michael’s. But we do think it’s a good thing to make use of those ancient Christian symbols and usages which have been aids to faith throughout the Christian era. Bells, candles, vestments and so on. They’re visual aids. But more than visual aids, they’re – if I may so put it – the proper tools for the job. The traditional name for these liturgical objects is “sacramentals” - holy things. We have holy things just as we have the Holy Book.