

**Canterbury and Rome:  
Ecclesiastical Kindergarten Games  
by Bishop Song**

Let me see if I have this straight. The Pope has a clergy shortage and the Anglicans have a small group of alienated clergy who cannot adjust to women priests and bishops and who abhor the idea of homosexual people being welcomed into the Christian Church. Why not solve both problems at once? That seems to be the Pope's thinking, though it is couched inside a much more delicately worded statement. The Pope's stated agenda is one of deep concern for these clergy and some lay people whose consciences are disturbed by the modern push toward equality for women and gay people, so he has decided to intervene in the internal Anglican debates to offer these pre-modern traditionalists the alternative of becoming Roman Catholics.

It seemed to the Pope a perfect solution, since many of these traditionalists have long suffered from "Roman fever" and seemed to yearn for a church in which their prejudices would not be challenged. Like the Pope they are really bothered by such ideas as the suggestion that women might be full human beings, perhaps even created in "the image of God." They are upset at the thought that women might actually achieve power after gaining admission to heretofore all-male universities. That "fatal mistake" has encouraged women to press the boundaries of sexism that has limited women's place in society quite severely. These educated women are today aspiring to positions once judged to be beyond their competence, like serving as the Prime Minister of Great Britain, as Secretary of State in both Republican and Democratic administrations in America and even as judges in the highest courts of our respective lands. Then, horror of horrors, these women even began to aspire to the priesthood. This practice has now "corrupted" Anglican orders by introducing, as the Vatican has stated,

"a peculiar distortion" into the priesthood, since this profession was "ordained by God to be an all-male enclave." Now in England these recently ordained women even think they can be bishops. Actually, the Anglican Churches in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand already have women bishops, but there is a certain English mentality that suggests that nothing is real until it happens in England. To have English women bishops, these traditionalists argue, would give women not only authority over men, in clear violation of the teaching of St. Paul, but also since bishops ordain priests, this abnormality would spread like a cancer throughout the whole communion.

The second difficulty these traditionalists have that warms the Pope's heart is with homosexual persons, who are now actually showing up in the ranks of the ordained. Their presence is not new, but their unwillingness to hide or to act ashamed is. One of them has been elected and consecrated to be an Anglican bishop in New Hampshire. Others will surely follow.

The issue of homosexuality is even more frightening to these traditionalists because its acceptance would blow open the priestly closet in which gay men have hidden in the Church for centuries. In a clear twist of both rationality and morality, the Church has always assumed that homosexuality is not a sin so long as it is both hidden and denied by the Church. To admit that many might choose the priesthood because they did not want to be married destroys the propaganda of sacrifice!

Traditionalist Anglican and main line Roman churches have long ago learned how to survive in this overt dishonesty. In Rome, coupled gay priests frequently serve on the same parish staffs and share the same rectories. In Anglicanism gay clergy couples have, with their homophobic bishop's consent, maneuvered to serve adjacent churches. In both churches gay clergy have learned to confess only to

homosexual confessors. Still the hostile rhetoric goes on. Benedict XVI calls homosexuality a "deviant lifestyle" and the Archbishop of Canterbury calls it "an impediment to Anglican unity." They still pretend that they can cure what is not a sickness and they can condemn what we now know is a natural part of the spectrum of human sexuality.

Since sunshine is not welcomed in this dishonest world of ecclesiastical repression, when the Anglican Church began to challenge its prejudices against gay men and lesbians, and to ordain them openly, these traditionalist Anglican priests began to threaten to form a separate church. Rome saw this as the opening for which they have waited since the Reformation and issued an official invitation to these priests and their congregations to become Roman Catholics. A few more sexist, homophobic priests and lay people would hardly be noticed in that church. That decision set the stage for an unusual press conference held in London in late October.

Called by the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, who heads the Roman Catholic Church in England, this press conference needed a bit of perfume so the Archbishop of Canterbury, who heads the Church of England, was invited to attend. The Vatican's pre-emptive strike was explained as a response to the Pope's pastoral concern for these traditionalists, yet the Archbishop of Canterbury had been informed of this "deep concern" just hours earlier.

In his formal proposal, the Pope invited these Anglicans to become Roman Catholics under the terms of a special concordat. Married Anglican priests could retain their wives and would be allowed to function as Roman priests, but only after being "re-trained and re-ordained" since Anglican orders are "null and void." They must, of course, subscribe to all Catholic doctrine from the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin, which became dogma only in 1854, to

the Bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, which became dogma only in 1950. They would have to recognize and accept papal infallibility, which became dogma in 1870 and which is of course the glue that keeps the authority lines of this church clear, firm and even despotic. These former Anglicans would have to teach the Catholic position on birth control, abortion and end of life issues, and would be required to tell their former colleagues that there was only one true church and Anglicans were at best schismatics and at worst heretics. As a sweetener, Rome would allow the use of liturgies that had an Anglican aura. Not only did the Pope encourage these priests to become Roman Catholics, but he also invited them to bring their entire congregations and all their church property with them, as if these clergy owned their churches.

The Archbishop of Canterbury sat beside his Catholic colleague in pained silence. No matter what happens in the Anglican Communion, he seems to respond with the sympathy-seeking rhetoric about how much harder this will make his job, as if that had anything to do with anything. One wonders if the Archbishop would regard it as pastorally sensitive if these traditionalists were racists whose consciences were offended by the end of slavery, segregation and apartheid. This press conference reminded me of little boys playing the game, "My heavenly daddy is stronger than your heavenly daddy!" Only the religiously naïve and the immature play this kind of ecclesiastical game, but here it was in full display being played by the spiritual heads of the first and third largest body of Christians in the world.

If Anglicans really want to be part of this kindergarten theater of the absurd, I suggest that we match arrogance with arrogance and be equally as insensitive as the Pope has been. This is what I think the Archbishop of Canterbury should have said:

"Your Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, we are very pleased to transfer to

you these fringe members of our church who still define women as subhuman and who regard homosexual persons as deviant and abnormal. We hope they will be happy in a church like yours. We Anglicans, however, must move on to engage our modern world. In the spirit of our new relationship, in which each church is free to offer solace through an invitation to those in our respective communions whose consciences are disturbed, we offer this new ecumenical initiative. We invite all gay Roman Catholic clergy who are tired of hiding in dishonesty to become Anglicans. To ease their transition we will allow some Roman liturgies to be used. We also invite all those alienated Roman Catholic lay people who can no longer twist their minds into first-century pretzels in order to assent to dogmas that the intellectual revolution of the past 500 years has rendered unbelievable to come now into a Church where they can explore truth with minds not fettered by the myth of "divine revelation." We invite those lay people who believe in sexual equality and who have long favored both the marriage of clergy and the ordination of women to the priesthood to come to us so that they will no longer have to live with spiritual schizophrenia. We invite those Roman Catholics who choose to practice birth control as a moral choice in an overpopulated world and who can no longer tolerate being told that family planning is evil and therefore condemned by God, especially since they have no intention of refraining from doing it, to consider becoming Anglicans, which would mean that they could stop living a lie. We will also receive your clergy without the indignity of re-training or re-ordaining them. We might require them to undergo some classes in thinking for themselves, since they have had little experience in that, and we might ask them to undergo sensitivity training in human relations. In the western world we have learned that this kind of training is necessary both in business and in such things as police instruction to deal with entrenched prejudices."

Such a speech would make it clear that two can play this childish game. Activity like that displayed at this press conference is deeply

embarrassing to those of us who still claim the title of Christian and who seek to walk with integrity into the mystery of God. I stand aghast at the level to which religious dialogue has now descended. How lonely and depressed the Carpenter of Galilee must be as he sees what is done in his name. Christianity can do better than this. Christianity must do better than this.

- John Shelby Spong