

Introduction

This brief guide is pastoral in its intent: to help Roman Catholics increase their understanding of the Episcopal Church. It may be useful for families in which members come from both traditions or when a Roman Catholic and an Episcopalian contemplate marriage.

Catholic and Protestant

The Episcopal Church has the distinction of being both catholic and protestant. It is catholic in its faith tradition, liturgy, and sacramental life while being protestant in some of its polity, or governance. During the sixteenth century the West underwent the religious upheaval of the Reformation. After horrendous turmoil and persecution of both catholics and protestants by English monarchs, England managed to shape a national church which retained the catholic faith handed down from the apostles through apostolic succession, but reorganized to be independent of the papacy in Rome.

The Church of England is officially separated from the Roman Catholic Church but maintains respect for the bishop of Rome and his office. It retains the hierarchy of bishops as overseers of dioceses responsible for the integrity of the church and pastors of its clergy and people, just as in the Roman Catholic Church; but the Church of England flattened out the governance of the church considerably.

There is no papacy or any structure which resembles papal organization. There is no magisterium or college of cardinals. The archbishop of Canterbury, for historic reasons, heads what is known as the Anglican Communion, operating as a bishop among bishops, first among equals—not as a pope with claims of infallibility on matters of faith and morals. The archbishop of Canterbury's guidance and direction is important, but he advises rather than rules.

Unique Christian Contribution

England, through its colonization and missionary work, spread the gospel through its unique church. Settlements in America, particularly on the eastern seaboard, were heavily influenced by the Church of England. Political realities contributed again to the shape of the church as the American Revolution took place. Americans no longer wanted to be part of the church of the oppressor. A new church form had to emerge in the new America.

The Church of England in the nascent country became the Episcopal Church after the Revolution. Born of catholic and protestant genes, the Episcopal Church took its name to reflect its continued governance by bishops in apostolic succession. (“Episcopal” is from the Greek *episcopos*, which means “bishop,” one who oversees and governs the faithful.)

The revised organization of the church in America paralleled that of the new government. Armed with a constitution

and a set of canons (laws), the Episcopal Church organized two houses, an upper chamber and a lower chamber, parallel to Congress: the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies, composed of elected clergy (priests and deacons) and laity. The new American government and the newly organized church worked in concert to serve the people of the new republic.

Anglicanism and the Sacramental Life

The Episcopal Church is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, with the archbishop of Canterbury serving as the symbolic head of the communion. These 80 million people adhere to the teachings of both the Old and New Testaments and use the edifying books of the Apocrypha in worship, as do Roman Catholics. (Protestant denominations do not use readings from the Apocrypha.)

The term Anglican is used not only to refer to the church in England shaped

during the sixteenth century, but also to the continuing connection among all churches founded by England's colonization and missionary endeavors.

Anglicans are liturgical Christians, along with Roman Catholics, the Orthodox from the great eastern Christian tradition, and some Lutheran churches. As Anglicans, we revere the liturgy and consider the celebration of the eucharist our central act of worship. Often called the mass by Roman Catholics and Catholic-minded Episcopalians, the celebration of the eucharist is a tradition handed down through the ages to the present and requires duly ordained bishops or priests to preside.

Roman Catholics are often surprised to find the mass being offered in the Episcopal Church. Just as we share the same eucharistic liturgy, we share in the same sacramental life which begins with our baptism and ends with our death. The sacramental life is illustrated by the liturgical forms provided in *The Book of Common*

Prayer: baptism, eucharist, confirmation, reconciliation of a penitent (confession), ministration to the sick and to the dying (unction and extreme unction), holy matrimony, and ordination. These same sacramental events are those practiced by the Roman Catholic Church.

Local custom may cause some sacramental events to receive more emphasis than others. For example, in recent times, healing services have become popular, whereas a generation or so ago this was not the case in most Episcopal churches. The practice of confession varies widely. The forms for confession (reconciliation of a penitent) are established in the Prayer Book. A “general confession and absolution” is a normative part of the liturgy on Sundays and holy days, and private confession with a priest is provided for on other occasions, or at the request of a penitent.

A Historical Note:

The Book of Common Prayer

In the sixteenth century in England, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer compiled and edited *The Book of Common Prayer* for liturgical and personal prayer use. It was in English! This was considered heretical by the Roman Catholic establishment of the time, but in the mid-twentieth century, during Vatican II, celebration of the Roman mass was authorized in the vernacular, the tongue of the people.

The Book of Common Prayer is the quintessential Anglican book. It contains a multitude of liturgies for worship, including daily offices derived from the monastic tradition and eucharistic liturgies. It is rich with biblical phrases and content, including the entire Psalter. It has the Outline of the Faith (a brief catechism) and historical documents. Also it contains the church calendar, including saints' days and holy days.

If you wish to understand and appreciate the Episcopal Church, read *The Book*

of *Common Prayer* to take the journey of faith with other Anglicans across the world. We pray what we believe. (*Lex orandi, lex credendi.*) We are sometimes called the “People of the Prayer Book.”

Baptized a Catholic?

Even though many Roman Catholics say, “I was baptized a Catholic,” and many Episcopalians say, “I was baptized an Episcopalian,” in reality baptism brings the child or adult into the body of Christ as a Christian. Becoming a Christian trumps any denominational affiliation.

Our parents or godparents choose the church home and tradition for us until we are capable of making our own decisions about our faith journey. Many times we affirm our parent’s choice later in life. Sometimes we find a fuller expression for our faith journey in another tradition.

The Episcopal Church recognizes the baptism of other Christians. In the statement known as the *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral*, found on page 876 of the

Prayer Book, we read of:

1. Our earnest desire that the Saviour's prayer, "That we all may be one," may, in its deepest and truest sense, be speedily fulfilled; and
2. That we believe that all who have been duly baptized with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, are members of the Holy Catholic Church.

Christians, having been duly baptized, are never *rebaptized*. Roman Catholics wishing to become members of the Episcopal Church are received with the following words by the bishop:

N[ame], we recognize you as a member of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and we receive you into the fellowship of this Communion. God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless, preserve, and keep you. *Amen*.

Familiarity: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church

Persons raised in the Roman Catholic Church usually find great comfort in the liturgy of the Episcopal Church. With variations for local customs, the eucharistic liturgy follows the traditional structure of the mass. Some churches have a strong musical tradition; others offer shorter services suited to young families. Many churches offer a variety of services and service times to meet the needs of a diverse population.

Variations on the Theme: Coming to the Table

Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, the Orthodox, and many Lutherans share the historic roots of the early church. This is what binds us together as liturgical churches. It is no accident that when we attend the eucharist in these churches, we are struck with the familiar. The more we appreciate one another's commonalities

and respect the diversity which historical, political, and economic forces caused, the more we live into being the body of Christ as followers of Christ.

A painful and difficult reality exists, however, regarding the receipt of Holy Communion among these historic, liturgical churches. Roman Catholic official teaching prohibits non-Roman Catholics from receiving Holy Communion in its church. The Orthodox prohibit non-Orthodox Christians from receiving Holy Communion in its churches. (The Orthodox, for historical reasons, regard Roman Catholics as protestant.) Both discourage members from receiving Holy Communion in other churches.

What about the Episcopal Church? We part with our brothers and sisters in this regard. We offer Holy Communion to all persons baptized in the name of the Trinity, who recognize the real presence of Jesus Christ's body and blood in the sacrament. We believe Holy Communion to be God's gift to God's people—not the church's gift only to some.

We respect both the Roman and Orthodox Churches for their historic concern to protect the integrity of the eucharist; however, we recognize that the real presence of Christ occurs in the celebration of the eucharist in Roman, Anglican, and Orthodox communions.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer used the phrase “real presence” to describe the sacred event of the consecration of the elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Those receiving this Holy Communion receive the body and blood of Christ actually and completely in the sacrament. This is the Anglican understanding of the mystery of the eucharistic celebration. We do not try to explain this mystery. How Christ becomes present in the form of common bread and wine is for only God to know. We experience and appreciate what no human can understand, the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

This stands in contrast to protestant worship which often treats the Last

Supper as a memorial only.

Roman Catholics who recognize the real presence of our Lord in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist are welcomed to receive Holy Communion in the Episcopal/Anglican Church; however, we respectfully recognize that they may choose not to do so in light of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

Faith, Morals, and Decision-Making

The Episcopal Church does not have the Roman Catholic Church's apparatus for moral and doctrinal decision-making. In lieu of a pyramidal, hierarchical structure, the Episcopal Church relies upon the regular convening of its bishops and elected clergy and laity to pray, ponder, and seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in their deliberations about issues and challenges of a broken but beautiful world.

The Episcopal Church invites all its members to participate in decision-making. We believe all the baptized are

given authority in the church by virtue of their baptism. That means that both the clergy and the laity have a voice in major decisions and actions.

Episcopalians (and Anglicans worldwide) use three traditional tools in making decisions. They are holy scripture, church tradition, and reason (as exercised within the church, not by individuals separately). We always conduct our business prayerfully.

Anglican decision-making is not neat or tidy. It struggles, like democracy, with ambiguity and shaded meanings, but it is a faithful approach to conforming to the will of God in the church and in the world.

Two hallmarks of Anglicanism are its ability to work in the middle (the *via media* concept) and pragmatism (taking a realistic approach to situations). The authority of the church is exercised by the bishops of the church, by resolutions of conventions held in each diocese, and in the constitution and canons, both national and diocesan. The church does

not lack for ecclesiastical authority, but it seeks to include all the baptized in the ministry and administration of the church. The body of Christ is put to work.

Current Tides of Controversy

There is never a time without controversy in a living, breathing church or family. In the early part of the twenty-first century the Episcopal Church is struggling, as are all churches, with issues of human sexuality, moral behavior, and ethics for both laity and the clergy.

We are unlikely to see uniformity of belief in these complex subjects in the near future. Meanwhile, we continue in our faith journey and sacramental life, while deliberative bodies work to come to grips with the complexities of human sexuality in all its mysterious variety. Challenges of science and technology, developing at lightning speed, also pose continuing ethical questions. Again, appointed bodies of clergy and the laity

address contemporary issues on an on-going basis for the benefit of the faithful and the world.

Men, Marriage, and Women in Holy Orders

Since the Reformation in England, the Anglican Church has permitted marriage of its clergy. There is no biblical injunction against it, nor has lifelong celibacy proven to be efficacious for most persons. The Roman Catholic Church has required a celibate clergy for centuries, but always with exceptions. Currently, if an Anglican priest, married, perhaps with children, determines to become a Roman Catholic priest, he and his family are welcomed. Roman Catholic priests of the Latin Rite who desire to marry and have a family are not accorded this right at this time. Many deacons are married. Those catholic churches of eastern Christendom in communion with Rome, known by the less frequently used term 'Uniat' churches, have and maintain a married

clergy through the orders of deacon and priest.

Marriage in the Episcopal Church, for laity and clergy, requires premarital preparation and counseling. Remarriage in the church is permitted, under certain provisions, recognizing that sometimes circumstances necessitate the dissolution of a marriage. Remarriage in the church may not be entered into without the review and consent of the bishop, however. If the bishop determines that the parties seeking remarriage are committed to a lifelong monogamous marriage and meet all necessary obligations to former spouses or children, they may be given permission to marry in the church.

In the Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Communion, both men and women are now found in the three-fold orders of ministry: bishop, priest, and deacon. There are pockets within the Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Communion where this practice is not fully supported, however. This

development has caused great joy for many and great consternation for others.

The Episcopal Church in the United States began ordaining women in the 1970s. They also may marry and have families, like the male clergy.

Saints and Sinners

The Episcopal Church welcomes all saints and sinners. We revere and honor the saints of the church, the blessed virgin Mary (some say the rosary, some do not), and we all strive to be saints, as the famous All Saints' hymn says, "...and I mean, God helping, to be one too." We strive to be inclusive, not exclusive, using our intellect and our heart to live faithfully in the world God gives us to love and protect. We value the sanctity of life and take seriously the admonition of our Lord to love God, and love our neighbor as ourselves—for we are all made in God's image and likeness.

Come anytime. You are most welcome.

About the Author

Eleanor Lynch Ellsworth currently serves St. James by-the-Sea in La Jolla, California, as Priest-in-Residence for church and the world ministries and is founder of the Faith Institute. Canonically resident in the Diocese of San Diego, she has also served parishes and Episcopal schools in West Tennessee, Maryland, and Washington, D.C.