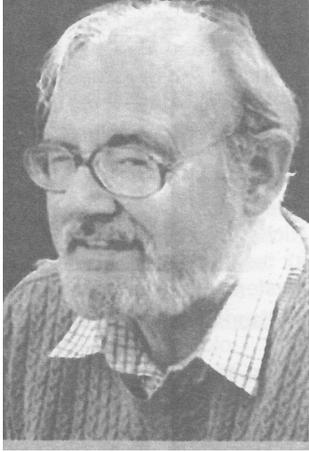


SACRAMENTAL ASSURANCE AND THE ANGLICAN TRADITION

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Abstract

“Sacramental assurance” is an idea that has been brought to the fore by conservative Anglo-Catholics in the debate about women bishops. It is interesting that some of its proponents appeal to the 39 Articles – which, though undoubtedly tending to a Calvinist understanding of the Sacraments, can be and have been read in different ways in Anglican history. The debate about sacramental assurance helps to clarify the fault-lines between different Anglican understandings of the Sacraments (more specifically the Eucharist) and indeed of Church and ministry. It is as easy for many liberals as it is for evangelicals to reject out of hand the thought-world which gives rise to such an idea – and all the more so because of the use to which it is currently being put. It may however be helpful to consider whether those of us who call ourselves liberal have anything to learn from it, and whether it can be interpreted in a way rather different from the conservative Catholic position.

Introduction

At the end of July an interesting article by Fr Simon Killwick appeared in the Church Times. It attempted to explain why it was so important to the members of Forward in Faith that the validity of the Sacraments be **absolutely** assured, and not put in doubt by new and as yet not universally accepted innovations such as women priests (let alone women bishops). Interestingly, Fr Simon appealed to the Thirty-Nine Articles at several points, not least the reference to “certain sure witnesses” in Article 25.

The Articles are not customarily a source of appeal for Anglo-Catholics, any more than they are for liberals. Given their essentially Calvinist tone, it is more likely to be those on the evangelical wing who would find them authoritative. Even there they tend to be interpreted selectively. For the majority of Anglicans, they are principally a snapshot of Anglican belief at around the time of the Reformation: of significant historical interest but little more. Yet the requirement that the clergy should give general assent to them suggests a residual conviction on the part of ecclesial authorities that they have something to do with the definition of Anglicanism over against other Christian traditions.

It may therefore be of some interest to look at what the Articles actually say about the Eucharist.

What the 39 Articles say – and why

Article 25 makes it clear that both the two sacraments recognised by the Articles, Baptism and Eucharist, are not just “badges or tokens of profession” but also “certain sure witnesses” and most importantly “effectual signs of grace”. Furthermore, although they are only effectual to those who have faith, they also have an effect – a negative one – on those who receive them unworthily without faith (see also Article 29). They are clearly, therefore, something more than a visual aid with purely subjective effects. Moreover, against the views of some extreme reformers, they are considered (Article 26) to “work” irrespective of the worthiness of the minister (a reassuring doctrine). They are acts of Christ in his Church, not of individual ministers – be those ministers good or evil, or (as many might now add) male or female, straight or gay.

However, against Rome, the Articles make clear that it is only in the *use* of the sacraments – the pouring of water or the receiving of bread and wine – that these signs are effectual. The concept of a Real Presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine as such - which Luther wanted to believe in but Calvin and others viewed with more suspicion - is not actually denied, but the contentions that it is not “to be gazed upon or carried about” (Article 25), and that unworthy communicants in no sense at all receive *Christ* (Article 29), but only a sort of condemnation for blasphemy, rather imply such a denial.

The strength of this argument lies in the Articles’ repudiation of possible idolatry. Whilst such “Romish” practices as Benediction in its present form are much later than the Articles, one can understand the concern about focusing on the “gazing upon” the Host as equivalent to idol-worship and as distracting from the main object of the Sacrament. Given that so much mediaeval devotion was based precisely and almost exclusively on that rather than on regular participation in Communion, this emphasis is very forgivable.

But it does not really address the question *how* the Eucharist is an effectual sign.

The emphasis in Article 25 on the *use* of the sacraments would seem to imply that it is in the action, rather than the elements themselves, that their nature as “effectual signs” rests. There is much in scripture, and in liturgies down the ages, to support that approach. However this is often linked to the question of the Eucharistic sacrifice, to which we must now turn.

Article 31 addresses the uniqueness of the sacrifice of Christ in unequivocal terms, and violently condemns the “sacrifices of masses” as attempts to repeat or add to that. This would seem to deny any possibility of understanding the Eucharistic action as sacrificial. The only point at which the concept of sacrifice offered by the Church appears in Cranmer’s liturgy is the reference to the sacrifice of “ourselves, our souls and bodies” in the Prayer of Oblation which *follows* the Communion.

This Article was a great battleground at the time of the Oxford Movement. Newman and others argued that there is a difference between condemning the “sacrifices of masses” – discrete rites which might be held to earn God’s favour in their own right – and condemning the “Sacrifice of the Mass”! Their point was that every Eucharist is a participation in something that has already happened, not a repetition of it or a way of earning merit in itself.

The Articles – context and interpretation

The problem here is philosophical. The concept of participation, powerful in the New Testament and supported in Platonist philosophy, had been largely lost in the growing (Aristotelian and later nominalist) individualism of later mediaeval culture – each person, each thing, each event was seen as existing in its own right.¹ Therefore it was not surprising that each Mass came to be seen as having an effect – of gaining forgiveness and earning merit – in its own right also. This could, and did, lead to the idea that the Church through its priests could manipulate God, an idea which is clearly sub-Christian.

The problem was made worse by the contemporary understanding of what Jesus had done on the Cross. The predominant model was one of paying debts and/or accruing credits or merits. Whilst some scriptural precedent can certainly be found for this model, it was not the only nor the principal one in the early Church (and still is not within Eastern Orthodoxy), but in the Church of the West, from the time of Anselm quite early in the Middle Ages, it had become predominant. It was only a short step from this to the idea that each offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice could pay a debt or accrue a merit (eg fewer years in Purgatory). The Reformers for the most part accepted the prevailing model of understanding the Passion, but rightly found repugnant the idea that repeated Masses could earn Brownie points in heaven.

That left them with a conviction that the Eucharist was all about an *action* but no secure description of what that action consisted in. The result was that *in practice* that action was often reduced in the churches of the Reformation to the sort of pledge of allegiance (*sacramentum* in its original Latin meaning), and/or love-feast, which Article 25 claims

¹ Much has been written on this, but I am particularly indebted to a book by my former college chaplain Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (SPCK 1972).

as valid but not exhaustive descriptions of a sacrament. Beyond that, its meaning became all too largely dependent on the feelings which it stirred up in the individual worshipper – which is probably where, for many people, it remains today.

Why is this important and regrettable? Is it indeed, as the proponents of the Oxford Movement hoped, possible to interpret the Articles in a more “catholic” way? Is it desirable?

It should be said that the emphases on “pledge of allegiance” and “love-feast”, which the Articles do affirm, are not inconsequential. They do at least remind us that the Eucharist is a corporate (and not merely individual) laying hold of a story which is bigger than all of us and affirming our commitment to it. The Passion, however we understand it, is at the centre of that story – though it also includes Incarnation, Resurrection and the rest, again however we understand them. Thus even within the Articles there is the potential for a sense that every celebration of the Eucharist is a participation in the supreme Sacrifice. In fact a host of Anglicans down the centuries – from Laud and the Non-Jurors to that very Catholic Protestant John Wesley – were able to interpret the Articles in that way long before the Tractarians, though admittedly they seem to have been in the minority.

But is it really all that important to recover a genuinely Catholic doctrine of sacramental assurance? At this point it is necessary to return to Fr Simon’s arguments.

Sacramental assurance in the current context

Objections to the idea of sacramental assurance, as expressed by Fr Simon, could take any of the following forms.

1. A search for “assurance” in finite earthly things, however holy, is misguided.
2. “Assurance” does matter but it is not to be found in the sacraments.
3. The idea of sacramental assurance is a valid one but it is to be found elsewhere than in mechanically assured and universally accepted orders of ministry.

The first argument has something going for it. Only God is “sure”, and it is part of the maturity of the Christian to accept the uncertainty of all earthly things, even (especially) including his/her own faith, and to refuse to absolutise them. There is a great truth here which must be borne in mind in all subsequent discussions. But this truth itself must not be absolutised. Against it we must ask how it is that the Gospel is Good News if it does not in some way enable us to transcend the uncertainties of earthly existence. To deny totally the possibility or desirability of the assurance of heaven coming to us in the things of earth is surely to deny the relevance of the Incarnation.

The second argument is one which might be attractive to Evangelicals, who find assurance in Scripture and in personal faith (or the Holy Spirit), and may regard the sacraments as at best supporters to that, useful visual and tangible aids but no more. The problem of that argument is demonstrated daily by instances of idolatry of Scripture (fundamentalism) and of personal faith and experience. It might at least equally well be said that Scripture and personal experience are best used as aids, helpful but not wholly and straightforwardly reliable, to understanding and grasping the reality of Christ, the image of the invisible God, in his sacramental presence.

The third argument raises questions about what we mean by Church and ministry. It is unfortunate for Fr Simon that Rome still does not, strictly speaking, regard Anglicanism as a valid church or its orders of ministry as valid. The logical implication therefore is that, if Fr Simon seeks sacramental assurance, he should go to Rome. The Articles however have a rather circular definition of the Church as a place where the Word of God is truly preached and the sacraments are duly administered, with the implication that this “true” Church, which *ex hypothesi* includes the Church of England, is the earthly guarantor of the sacraments and the sacraments are part of the earthly guarantee of the Church. If that is so, then if the Church or any part of it decides under God to admit women to its historic ministry – whether that is within the Apostolic Succession, as traditionally understood and endorsed in the 1662 Ordinal, or otherwise - the sacraments presided over by such women are valid and offer the assurance of the true and saving presence and action of Christ.

Of course the Church is broken and flawed – just as our individual faith is broken and flawed. That is recognised in the Articles, at least as far as Rome and the Orthodox are concerned (Article 19), but arguably more generally; the “pure” Church portrayed in that Article may or may not exist in reality. If this is so, and if the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is “guaranteed” by the Church, then *absolute* sacramental assurance may not be possible. Every sacramental act – whether performed by a priest in the Apostolic Succession, in communion with the historic churches, or by some other minister – is a shadow of the ideal envisaged by Fr Simon. But it is a substantial shadow. And if the Christian faith is built upon the idea of incarnation – that the things of heaven do indeed come to us in, with and under the things of earth – then that substance is a fact of importance.

A liberal response

Jonathan Clatworthy, in his paper on this site entitled *Women Bishops and Valid Sacraments*, takes a somewhat different view from that advanced above. He criticises Fr Simon Killwick’s argument much as I have done, but he goes further in arguing that that argument presupposes a view of sacramental validity which is entirely at odds with the contemporary empirical world-view and based on a dualism which characterised the beliefs of the Tractarians (and indeed other Christians) in the 19th century. I fully understand his position insofar as it reflects my first objection to the Killwick thesis, namely that that dualistic approach seeks an “assurance”, above and beyond the flux of existence, which is not available to us mortals and the quest for which, as our sceptical modern age recognises, leads rapidly to idolatry and magical manipulation. Where I would differ from him is in the interpretation and evaluation of mediaeval, Tractarian and contemporary world-views.

As I have already implied, the contemporary world-view is not immediately sympathetic to the idea of a sacrament. It is empirical and existential, and not very open to ideas about a dimension beyond the empirical and the existential. Above all, it disenchant nature, and is hostile to “magic”. But this latter term, which Jonathan uses in such a derogatory sense, needs some unpacking. If it is about manipulating some power from beyond, then I entirely agree that that is sub-Christian, and also that ideas about ministry and sacraments have been misused in just that way, both in mediaeval times (against which the Reformation and the 39 Articles were a reaction) and more recently. If it is

about accessing mysteries of which a narrow scientific empiricism knows little or nothing, then I would argue that that access always was and still is part of what it is to be human. If the contemporary world-view has lost that dimension – or relegated it to the allegedly lesser, subjective world of the arts - then it is not quite as wonderful, or quite as open to saving grace, as Jonathan makes out.

If, as Jonathan appears to imply, the validity of the sacraments lies purely in their observable effects, then we are faced with a serious dilemma about “assurance”. It seems to rest entirely in the subjectivity of the moment – that of the worshippers, and that of the celebrant as he/she manipulates them (I use that word advisedly). Under those circumstances, it may indeed be the case that the “unworthiness” of the minister hinders the effect of the sacrament. That, as I have argued above, is definitely not Good News.

It is true, as Jonathan argues, that the Tractarians – and their contemporary successors in Forward in Faith – hark back to an understanding of the mediaeval world-view which both fails to reflect the lived experience of the mediaevals and its difference from ours, and is somewhat at odds with more modern ways of viewing life. In F D Maurice’s famous words: “they oppose the spirit of the age with the spirit of a former age rather than with the Spirit of the ever-living Christ”. And that will not do. But are they necessarily entirely wrong, as Jonathan implies, to “oppose the spirit of the age”? The idea that saving grace comes to us from beyond the realms of the empirical, through realities – a Person, an action, a sacramental presence - which are independent of the subjectivity of the moment, seems to me to be a necessary element in Good News. Any “spirit of the age”, however rich in many ways, which either distorts that idea into supernaturalist magic or ignores it in the name of empiricism, seems to me to be equally under judgment.

Another way forward?

The 39 Articles may be Calvinist in their tendencies, yet in their way, and in their time, they tried to uphold these truths. Fr Simon was right to spot that. The Forward in Faith position may be unacceptable to us on many grounds, but we cannot simply repudiate it without putting anything in its place except a thin modernism.

I do not want to suggest here that all versions of modernism are necessarily thinner, and less adequate to the totality of the human condition, than any other world-view. Jonathan’s understanding of the modern, liberal world-view is far more multi-faceted and richer than that of, say, Richard Dawkins. In his book *Liberal Faith in a Divided Church*² he challenges many aspects of the so-called modern world view and calls for a more holistic approach which acknowledges many things about reality that the hardline modernists would repudiate. Yet it has to be said that, historically, many who would call themselves “modern churchpeople” have had difficulty in finding coherent understandings, not only of the sacraments but also (and this is closely related) of Incarnation and Atonement. And I am not sure that, in this paper, Jonathan himself does full justice to his own wider vision. There is much in contemporary liberal theology, “modern” but not always “modernist” – from Tillich through the process-theologians to

² O Books 2008.

(perhaps) the Radical Orthodox³ – which can enrich our understanding of symbols, and hence sacraments, and hence sacramental assurance (I prefer the term sacramental objectivity). Space does not permit me to explore all of that here: simply to suggest that we do not have to accept, as uncritically as Jonathan at times seems to do, the world-view of the Enlightenment and the disappearance of “magic” (in its better sense) and grace from our world.

Perhaps if we go back to the analogy of the banknote we might find some clues. A banknote is valid, not because an individual or even a group says it is, but because of a widely shared confidence. That confidence may have been shaken somewhat (or it ought to have been) in the current economic crisis, but broadly it holds up, because it is based on a *shared story* about the nature of money. A *shared story* is equally, I suggest, a clue to understanding the sacraments. Postmodern theory may raise fundamental questions about “grand narratives”, and the versions of the Christian story which are currently peddled are increasingly multifarious; yet the sense of shared story is still real in mainstream Christianity⁴. And it is to that shared story that, Sunday by Sunday, many of us make our oath of allegiance (*sacramentum*) not only individually but corporately and in mutual love.

The corporate life of the Church which shares that story – horribly broken and flawed yet powerful (even in its observable effects) and centred upon sacramental reality – is and must remain our source of assurance that, in Emily Dickinson’s words, “this world is not Conclusion”.

³ For a critical but not unfriendly “liberal” analysis of the thought of this sometimes obscure theological school, see Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (SPCK 2007).

⁴ At this point I perceive interesting possibilities of a most unlikely coming together between Jonathan Clatworthy and the supremely anti-modern(ist) J R R Tolkien. The latter, in his famous essay *On Fairy Stories*, argues that much of what we call “fantasy” or “the supernatural” is not imposed upon natural reality at all, but reflects its true deepest dimensions, and that this is true above all of the greatest Story. (Thus *The Lord of the Rings* is not a Christian allegory, because it does not need to be; it merely reflects the same underlying realities as the Christ-story.) Perhaps this is not too far from Jonathan’s argument for an understanding of the sacraments which reflects everyday reality rather than an artificially imposed supernaturalism?