

PASTORAL LETTER FOR ANGLICAN PROVINCE OF AMERICA CLERGY: Since You Asked

A number of issues have come to my attention recently and some of these items were discussed at our recent Winter Conference at Warner Robins, Georgia. At the time I suggested I would issue a Pastoral Letter to address these items and distribute it to all of our Clergy. Then came the India trip from which the Team and I recently returned. Thank you for your patience.

These items will not be addressed in any particular order of importance but all are of concern for the good order of the Church. Some of these concerns emerged as the result of a telephone survey which was conducted with the Clergy towards the end of 2016. Some of those called were not available, some returned the phone message; others may not have had the opportunity to participate because there was no answer or perhaps the wrong phone number.

1. Cremations and scattering of Ashes. We have had no clear policy on this in the past. From some research, it seems now that the Vatican has issued a new policy, and I think it is a good one. I am sharing it in the scanned attachment that was from a link on the web. The guideline recommends that cremated remains of Parishioners be buried in cemeteries, rather than scattered or kept at home. "Following the most ancient Christian tradition, the Church insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries or other sacred place," state guidelines from the Vatican." The guidelines do not represent a change in the church's overall policy on burial and cremation, but rather underline "the doctrinal and pastoral reasons for the preference of the burial of the remains of the faithful and to set norms pertaining to the conservation of ashes in the case of cremation; in the light of the increasing popularity of cremation in many countries. The newly articulated ash norms include not storing human cremains in the home or refraining from scattering ashes, "in the air, on land, at sea or some other way...in order to avoid the appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism..." Read more in the attachment.

2. Office hours for the Parish Priest. With the popularity of the cell phone, there is no need to be out of touch with the parishioners unless you turn off your phone on your day out of the office. However, some clerical person should always be available for emergencies. It is also important even though you can be anywhere with the cell phone, to have regular office hours. I realize there are some of you who have a secular job and are not always available, but for those who are 'full time' it gives comfort to parishioners to know someone is regularly manning the fort as it were. This gives you the opportunity to do your Morning and Evening offices in the church and having the possibility of having a noontime Eucharist on certain days, all that would be open to the public. It is important to have stated

hours at the church because it limits the temptation of doing other things that need doing at home.

3. Availability by telephone. Unlike other means of communication such as letter writing, and newspaper ads, the telephone (cell) phone has become increasingly popular. In many cases too popular. Texting while driving is particularly irritating and dangerous. Having a Church telephone line however, is of critical importance. Inquirers will hesitate calling a cell phone, but will call the Church number. The worst thing to have happen in this regard, is to have an outdated message on your voice mail or have the mailbox so full it cannot take any more messages. The other bad practice is not listening to the messages and not following up on the calls the same day. The impression this gives is that no one is interested in the caller and they are not likely to call back.

4. Standardization of who may receive communion. This can be tricky especially for those who have a new family with children that you have never met presenting at communion. Going along with this are families who have joined us from other church traditions whose children have been receiving communion. One of the cardinal rules is, do not get into a discussion or argument at the altar with the parents over whether or not the child or children have been confirmed by a bishop. (I have had this happen). You can easily offend people by excommunicating them at the altar and you will never have the opportunity to talk with them about our church. The practice I encourage is to offer communion and then to engage the family to come to an instruction class in preparation for Confirmation. This may mean a separate time for the children who may be young (the Prayer Book does not specify age) to attend instruction at their age level for Confirmation. The rubric is fairly flexible on page 299.

Remember we are not called to be just "Mass Priests" but Pastors and Teachers. Part of what we are called to do is to minister the Sacraments to people but also to instruct them in the Holy Scriptures and the traditions of the Church, "... and to equip the saints from the work of the ministry."

5. Follow-up on Visitors to Church. Unless you are in one of our larger Churches, you probably will not be overwhelmed with visitors each Sunday. When a visitor or a family come, remember this is a gift from God that He is presenting to you. It is now your responsibility to follow-up and look after them. Try to connect with them by listening more than talking. Remember something in a personal way about the conversation which you can use in the follow-up. Follow-up time has a diminishing return by all research. The sooner you do the follow-up, the more likely they are to return. This begins diminishing after 24, 48 and 72 hours. It could be a phone call, or a hand-written note referring to the personal connection you made.

6. Flags in Church. There has been discussion about whether or not it is appropriate to have the American flag in the church as it is considered the symbol of a secular nation. The symbolism of entering the blessed and dedicated place of worship in our catholic tradition has to do with being present in the courts of heaven. We come, as the Jews did in ancient times, to enter the Temple of God where those worshippers would first purify themselves prior to entering the Holy Place. We as Anglican Christians believe we are purified by the sacrifice our Lord Jesus Christ provided through the Cross and can enter the Holy Place boldly. Since it is a sacred place of worship, should the symbol of our Nation or any other nation be in the courts of heaven?

The push back on this is that many of our Veterans and present military support the idea of having the flag in Church. I love our Country and our Flag and respect what it stands for and means to all patriotic Americans. I am not issuing a policy on this subject, but I think it is important to consider the appropriateness of what I have said. I do not wish to cause tension in the church or create a problem. I suggest, at a minimum, we should not have the National flag in the *sanctuary* of the church; but rather you find a place in the *nave*.

7. Clergy and tithing. I have heard arguments on both sides of whether or not tithing is part of our New Testament teaching. Neither our Lord nor his apostles have commanded anything in the area of tithes. The tithe was an Old Testament standard and the argument is that we should do at least under *grace* as was required under the *law*. The important principle here to me is if we are going to ask parishioners to pledge (tithe) or make a financial commitment to the church, as shepherds and leaders we should be willing to do so as well. We must lead by example.

In closing let me add that the issues which I have addressed in this Pastoral Letter are those which many of you have asked. There are others questions I am sure and as you have them, please do not hesitate to ask. I hope this is helpful.

+Walter

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