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GIVE ME OIL ON MY HANDS, MAKE ME ROMAN...

By David Wheaton

The story is told of an Anglican bishop who at an ecumenical gathering greeted his Orthodox counterpart with a threefold embrace. Afterwards the bishop's chaplain congratulated him on his symbolism, recognising how keen our Orthodox friends are on the doctrine of the Trinity. "I'm afraid it wasn't that at all," came the reply, "On the first embrace I lost my glasses in his beard, and I had to go back twice to find them!"

An amusing story, but it underlines the fact that symbolism can be misunderstood. No-one was more aware of this than the sixteenth-century Anglican Reformers, who recognized that there was much in the liturgical practices of their day which could be misleading. There is an old Latin saying *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which highlights the fact that the way we pray will shape what we believe. They were therefore very careful to remove from our liturgical patterns anything which would encourage the promotion or continuation of false doctrine.

To this end Archbishop Cranmer in his first revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* wrote an explanation *Of Ceremonies, why some be abolished, and some retained*.¹ This is still printed in the 1662 book, and is part of the historic formularies of our Church, to which all ministers are required to give assent. In his essay, which is well worth reading, Cranmer points out that some ceremonies are necessary for any liturgical order, and that the Prayer Book retains those which edify, but has put away those which were regarded as excessive, or could lead to superstitious blindness. Hence, for instance, the use of signing with the Cross in baptism was retained in spite of those who wished to see it dispensed with.

Nowhere was it more important to clarify what was happening than in the liturgy of ordination. The ritual observed in the pre-Reformed Roman church had included much ceremonial which sought to draw attention to their beliefs about the priesthood, and so the Reformers sought to limit the symbolism to that which would point to a Biblical understanding of Christian ministry. Consequently the heart of all three services for ordaining bishops, priests (presbyters) and deacons, is the Biblical pattern of the laying-on of hands in the context of prayer.

To bring out the Anglican understanding of the ministry of Word and Sacrament (the audible and visible words of God, as the Reformers taught), they added the symbolism of presenting the newly-ordained deacon with a New Testament (to bring out the liturgical role of the public reading of the Gospel), while priests and bishops were each given a Bible. With it priests were given authority to preach the Word and minister the holy Sacraments and the charge on delivering the Bible to bishops was based on several Scriptures and other admonitions relating to their office and culminating with the promise of 1 Peter 5:4.

This symbolism was retained when the use of the Book of Common Prayer was restored in 1662, and remained until the last century, when gradually practices have been reintroduced to our church which have not been part of the ordinal or our distinctive heritage, but would appear to have the aim of suggesting that we do in fact have the same intentions as the Church of Rome in our ordination services. One wonders whether this has been a conscious or sub-conscious reaction to the papal bull at the end of the nineteenth century which declared Anglican orders to be 'absolutely null and utterly void'.²

The development of the Oxford Movement in the mid-nineteenth century saw the reintroduction to

Church of England use of the mass vestments which had been proscribed since the Reformation. Because this was illegal there were a number of prosecutions for those adopting these practices, which sadly brought little credit on either plaintiffs or defendants: however, they did establish that such innovations were no part of historic Anglicanism.³

The wearing of copes had been permitted in cathedral and collegiate churches by the Canons of 1604⁴, but the mitre had no longer been worn. That was probably because of its late (eleventh century) and dubious origin. It was Archbishop Lang who in 1909 wore both cope and mitre in York Minster at ordinations, claiming to be the first bishop there or in the whole province to do so since the Reformation. His biographer tells how he did not wear the mitre initially at his enthronement, but was pleased that he had no protests when he did introduce it or when he subsequently saw vestments reintroduced for ordinary use in the Minster. Again at his enthronement in Canterbury nineteen years later he records that he did not at first wear cope and mitre but later introduced their use at ordinations, admitting that no previous Archbishop since the Reformation had ever worn a mitre either in the Cathedral or elsewhere.⁵

The problem which has been caused for many loyal churchmen by these innovations has been that the heirs and successors of those who introduced them have expected all clergy to follow their example. So now all bishops are expected to conform to the wearing of the mitre as well as the cope. It is a sad comment on the state of our church today, that while bishops can be appointed who appear to deny basic Christian doctrines or fail to uphold Biblical standards of morality, woe betides the one who is not prepared to go along with the accepted standards of liturgical vesture. John Stott's biographer records that when John was being interviewed by those responsible for the appointment of bishops he was asked about what liturgical vesture he was prepared to wear. His response was, 'I thought it was very inappropriate to make ecclesiastical millinery the criterion for episcopal suitability'.⁶

During the 1940s and 1950s certain bishops, notably Wand of London, Kirk of Oxford and Mortimer of Exeter, required their ordinands to wear the stole when being ordained deacon or priest. Many evangelicals were unhappy with this requirement, as they would not be wearing stoles in their future ministry, and it was regarded as a partisan usage, for Roman priests regard the wearing of the stole as essential for a valid sacrament. Representations about the matter were made to Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher of Canterbury by several principals of evangelical theological colleges, and he responded by circulating a directive to all bishops that no candidate should be debarred from ordination on the ground of being unwilling to wear the stole.⁷ At a subsequent meeting with leading evangelical clergy in connection with the revision of Canon Law Fisher expressed surprise that other cathedrals were not following the practice of the mother church of the Communion by ordaining clergy in the traditional Church of England dress of cassock, surplice, scarf and hood.⁸

Despite such agreements in the past, and a number of dioceses which allow evangelical candidates to be ordained in scarf and hood, in many cathedrals today pressure is still put on evangelicals to wear a stole for their ordination. Where they are not permitted an alternative, being denied wearing their traditional signs of office, they are indistinguishable from choir members. No regard is paid to the convictions of the individual concerned or of the parish where they will serve, and this is surprising in a church which prides itself on its tolerance of other people's views.

Today a further element of symbolism from the unreformed Roman church is being reintroduced to ordinations in the Church of England. At an ordination of priests at Michaelmas 2006⁹ the order of service included the following rubric and text:

The bishop may anoint the palms of the hands of each newly ordained priest, saying

'May God, Who anointed the Christ with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, anoint and empower you to

reconcile and bless his people’.

The report of the Revision Committee (GS1535) which proposes the introduction of this ceremony claims that anointing at ordinations is now fairly common (para.164). This writer has attended many ordinations in different dioceses over the years, but had not come across it hitherto. Those proposing this innovation point out the value of regulating practices which are becoming widespread in order to avoid bad practice, and so they claim to be providing words which will avoid the use of a formula which would be incompatible with Anglican doctrine. The words accompanying the anointing of the priests’ hands in the pre-Reformation ordination service were *Bless and sanctify, Lord, these hands of Thy priests for the consecrating of sacrifices, which are offered for the sins and negligences of the people, and for the blessing of those things which are necessary to the people’s needs.*¹⁰ The modern Roman rite for the ordination of priests maintains the sacrificial emphasis with the words *The Father anointed our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. May Jesus preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and to offer sacrifice to God.*¹¹

It is to be hoped that this ceremony will not become standard practice in the Church of England, as it is unnecessary, unAnglican, misleading and divisive. It is unnecessary because in adding further to the ceremonial it obscures the simple Biblical emphasis on the laying-on of hands in the context of prayer, and the delivery of the Bible, which have sufficed for valid ordinations in the Church of England for the past 450 years. It is unAnglican because it points to the Old Testament understanding of the priest as a person offering a sacrifice in the Lord’s Supper which was rejected at the Reformation. It is misleading as it introduces a wrong emphasis by drawing attention to the ordinands’ hands and leaves the congregation wondering what is so special about them. It is divisive because there are many loyal churchmen and women who will ask their bishop to exempt them from this ceremony, as has already happened. An ordination should be an uniting experience for the candidates, and should not be spoiled by the introduction of yet another partisan element into the ceremonial.

Those of us who wish to emphasise the principles of the Reformers are sometimes accused of attempting to turn the clock back. However, it is those who are reintroducing the ceremonial of the pre- and un-reformed church who are in effect turning it back!

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Endnotes:

- 1) This was printed at the back of the *First Prayer Book of King Edward the Sixth* in 1549 and then appeared in the front of the *Second Prayer Book of King Edward the Sixth* in 1552 following *The Preface*. In the 1662 revision it followed a new *Preface* and the former *Preface* now printed as *Concerning the Service of the Church*.
- 2) See the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII issued on 13 September 1896 entitled *Apostolicae Curae*.
- 3) See G. J. Cuming, *A History of Anglican Liturgy*, (London, Macmillan 1969) chapters 8 and 9, and Dyson Hague, *Protestantism of the Prayer Book* (London, Church Association, 1893), Appendix 3.
- 4) Canon 24.
- 5) See J.G.Lockhart, *Cosmo Gordon Lang*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949, pp.195 and 315.
- 6) See T. Dudley-Smith, *John Stott – a Global Ministry*, (Leicester, IVP, 2001) p.45.

- 7) See Lambeth Palace Library records, *Fisher* 109 and 210.
- 8) This was reported to the author in a conversation with the late Rev. L. F. E. Wilkinson following the latter's attendance at the meeting in question in the late 1950s.
- 9) The ordination in question was in the diocese of Oxford.
- 10) Quoted from the Sarum ordinal.
- 11) See *The Rites of the Catholic Church, volume ii* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991) p.45.