



July 5, 2022

Parlez-vous Anglican?

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The first time I visited an Episcopal church I felt lost. My oldest daughter had just started the seventh grade at an Episcopal school. I was curious to see what she was experiencing in her weekly chapel. But at that first encounter, it was as if I couldn't understand the language these Anglicans spoke. It seemed almost foreign.

I had stepped into the men's room before going into the service. Washing my hands, I spotted a bad combination of a stopped-up sink and a dripping faucet that spelled trouble. I mentioned this to the usher as he handed me a bulletin. His response: "Go to the undercroft and get the sexton." The undercroft? The sexton? I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to do.

Embarrassed, I turned around and walked out of the sanctuary. As soon as I saw someone else with a church name tag, I described the problem to her, and she assured me she would take care of it. I returned to the sanctuary and sat down, relieved that I had done my duty, even though I was still perplexed.

And I must admit, I've been perplexed ever since. What do all these terms we use mean? I get some of them. When the person in the chasuble stands, I stand. When they sit, I sit. When the priest offers me the host from the paten, before the pandemic, I could choose to intinct, or receive from the chalice after it is wiped with the purificator. This is all straight forward once you get used to the terms and the rhythm of the mass.

But what about the language of belief? What exactly do we believe? We recite the Nicene Creed every week, but I for one don't really pay attention to each detail in the profession of faith. And if I did,

I suspect that I wouldn't agree with every point. And that's precisely what I find attractive in Anglicanism.

We call ourselves a "big tent" church – we value diversity both in our beliefs and in our level of commitment. I am reassured that I will not be turned away from communion because of my lukewarm attitude toward a point of theology. I will not be judged by my stance on an issue of the day. And that's all good.

But the last time I was in a big tent, it was to take my kids to the circus. And with that comes a certain amount of chaos – growling tigers, plodding elephants, screaming children, someone about to fall from the high wire. But we like circuses, don't we?

And then there is the other metaphor we use for our Anglicanism, the *via media*. This is the middle route, winding our way between the extremes – avoiding what the Anglican divines considered the corruption of the medieval Roman church and the excesses of the Protestant Reformation. The *via media* is a sort of Catholicism without the pope. It is a gentler reformation – Calvin with a sense of humor. But remember, "middle" and "muddle" are not far apart.

We seem to be pretty sure as a group what we don't believe. It is harder, however, to clearly state what we do believe. What does it mean to be saved? Does it mean to live forever in a distant place called heaven? Or does it mean to live a renewed life here on earth, to respond to our calling, to our vocation to be bearers of the image of God?

And where exactly is heaven? Is it up there somewhere, or is it when God's Kingdom comes to earth, into our lives in the here and now? These are things about which we don't, indeed, we can't, all agree. Our beliefs are not all tidied up in a neat little package. At times, there is confusion about what we believe. Yes, there is chaos in our big tent.

But even that is reassuring to me. Augustine, the fifth century Christian theologian, famously said, "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*" – "If you understand, it is not God." The idea is that God cannot be understood, and that God is beyond anything we can grasp. This has become my watchword.

So, grab your E-ZPass® and head out on the *Via Media*. The traffic may seem suspiciously light; there simply are not as many travelers on this route. And remember, the language on the signposts may not always make sense. But pay attention. Stay in your lane. Surely the *Via Media* will get you where you're going.