

*A sermon for the Consecration of George Edward Councill
as Bishop XI of the Diocese of New Jersey
at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Trenton, New Jersey
on the Feast of Saint Luke, October 18, 2003
by The Reverend Alan M. Gates*

When one steps into a new role, it is a salutary exercise to consider how others in the past have carried out that role. An aspiring composer might look to the life and work of Beethoven or Stravinsky. A new mayor might find out just what Fiorello LaGuardia did to get an airport named after himself.

A task today, then, might be to come up with a bishop who could serve as the archetype for a newly minted successor. To whom might the Reverend Mr. Councill look for example and inspiration?

Because for many years your new bishop had the habit of dressing up as Saint Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, it occurs to me to wonder whether Nicholas might not be the appropriate episcopal role model. We are told that the 4th-century Nicholas was a pious man. In fact, the hagiography reports as follows:

Directly [after Nicholas] was born he was put in a basin to be washed, but, to the astonishment of the nurses, he stood up in the basin, and remained for two hours in ecstasy, his hands clasped, and his eyes raised to heaven.ⁱ

Uncommon piety – that’s good! Of course we know that Nicholas was generous. His legendary provision of bags of gold as dowry for three poor sisters probably helped turn St. Nicholas into Santa Claus. Generosity and pastoral attention – very good.

But now here’s a story about Bishop Nicholas which isn’t spread around much. It seems that Nicholas was present for the Council of Nicaea, at which the Arian heresy was being debated. Some of the partisans of Arius had set his teachings to music, and were singing their heretical little ditty, presumably to make their points more easily remembered. According to the tale,

the bishops, on hearing the song, raised their hands in horror, and ... wishing to express their disgust at blasphemous words, kept their ears fast closed, and their eyes fast shut. [At] this point [in a] sudden outbreak of fury, Nicholas, bishop of Myra, [dealt] a blow with all his force at Arius’s jaw.ⁱⁱ

Now, we don’t need a bishop with this kind of temper. Frankly, in the wake of last Saturday’s fracas at Fenway Park, we don’t want a model bishop who’ll put us in mind of Don Zimmer and Pedro Martinez. Let’s keep looking.

If we aimed for someone a little more recent, let’s say a bishop in our own Anglican tradition, perhaps we would come up with Samuel Wilberforce, 19th century Bishop of Oxford. He was a learned man, that’s good. Samuel was the son of William Wilberforce, a key player in the abolition of slavery in Britain. A family heritage of social justice – here’s a very strong credential. The drawback with Wilberforce, as can happen with quick-witted people, is that he didn’t always know how to use his sharp wit. Here’s one report: A cleric had introduced Gregorian chants into his church. Bishop Wilberforce found the choir lacking in its ability to pull off the challenge of such music.

After a prolonged and dreary dose of Gregorians, he ventured to suggest to the rector that perhaps they were a little unsuited to a country choir. The rector prided himself on the music, and said, ‘David sang his psalms to Gregorian melodies.’ [To which the bishop replied,] ‘Then I don’t wonder Saul cast his javelin at him.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Clever, but a little too frank. We don’t need a sarcastic bishop, or one whose eloquence is tactless.

Indeed, I am prepared after just two attempts to abandon the search for the perfect model bishop. Prepared simply to acknowledge that every bishop who ever was, and every bishop who ever will be, is bound to be both saint and sinner. Ancient or modern, black or white, male or female, our bishops will be no better than the best of us. And why would they be otherwise? Are they not “successors to the Apostles?” Is it not part of our claim to catholicity that our bishops are in direct lineage from The Twelve? And if so, why would they not share some of the qualities of those apostles: devoted, but also impetuous, like Peter; hard-working, but also competitive, like James and John; honest, but also a tad incredulous, like Thomas. By the laying-on-of hands at Ordination, our bishops truly are in Apostolic Succession – just as great, and just as human, as those apostles.

The apostles (and all the saints) are examples for us in our own spiritual journeys not for their perfection, but for their faith, for their devotion to our Lord. So it is with our bishops. One of those bishops in our own day, has put it succinctly: We are not called to success; we are called to faithfulness.^{iv}

Perhaps, then, we do not have a model for the “perfect” bishop. But we do have a mandate for the “faithful” bishop. That mandate comes to us through Scripture and tradition. Let’s look.

The role of bishops in the church of the New Testament was only just emerging. The *episkopoi*, the overseers, are mentioned only a few times. The Letter of Paul to Titus [1:7-9] suggests that *a bishop, as God’s steward, must be blameless; must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain.* On the contrary, the bishop must be *hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled.*

In those fledgling years of the church, the epistles are more likely to dwell on the *characteristics* of a bishop than the bishop’s *function*. For that function, we turn to the Prayer Book. Throughout this Consecration liturgy, the language of the Examination and the prayers defines the ministry which we gather to celebrate. They suggest that your bishop has three primary roles, each in Spirit-filled tension with the other. The bishop is Prophet, Priest, and Shepherd. To put it another way, the bishop’s concerns are Justice, Reconciliation, and Compassion. Allow me to dwell for a moment on each.

First, Justice. In a moment the Bishop-elect will be enjoined “boldly [to] proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of [his] people.” [BCP, p. 518]

The biblical role of prophet resides in many places in our church, and in our society. Wherever the insistent voice of justice calls us to account, there the prophet speaks. Many such voices are outside of established leadership. But insofar as bishops are our chief teachers, and insofar as they occupy the “bully pulpits” of our communion, and insofar as proclamation is a central Gospel task, a bishop cannot shun the prophetic role. Even those bishops who see themselves as primarily “pastoral” bishops, cannot leave the matter of justice to others.

Franciscan writer Richard Rohr describes the sort of justice the church is after, as distinct from the justice which is the concern of the gold-domed statehouse just down the block.

Our goal is *restorative* justice, while the best the (legal) system can do is *retributive* justice. The law cannot ever promise God’s restorative justice, much less offer true transformation. We have something much better to give, and we had better not lose it ... or we have lost everything Jesus taught us.^v

In other words, the justice a bishop proclaims is not just what is “fair,” but indeed what is visionary: what *looks like* the reign of Christ. When Jesus preached, as in our Gospel lesson today [Luke 4:14-21], what was the content of that preaching? It was “to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives.” Your bishop must never forget the role of prophet, never overlook the call of justice, never stop holding Christ’s restorative images of the Kingdom

up before your eyes, and those of your communities. And you and I must be open to that prophetic voice.

The bishop's second task is Reconciliation. In a moment the Presiding Bishop will charge the new bishop to "exercise without reproach the high priesthood to which [he has been] called." [BCP, p. 521] And what is the priesthood but the ministry of reconciliation? It is the bridging of estranged relationships – human and divine; human and human. And what is reconciliation but healing?

Here in New Jersey you have said that you seek in your new bishop a healer, and you have called just such a one. I assume that it was either fully intentional or fully providential that this consecration was set for the Feast of St. Luke, the Beloved Physician. "From God health spreads over all the earth," proclaimed our first Lesson [Ecclesiasticus 38:1-4, 6-10, 12-14] and we pray for just such health. Again I quote from Richard Rohr:

Our Christian goal must be the healing and reconciliation of the individual and, by implication, of the society. Mercy, patience, forgiveness, absolute trust in the possibility of growth and transformation, and God's power to save are our specialties, our primary products....^{vi}

Healing and reconciliation require mercy, forgiveness, and patience. Your bishop must never forget this priestly role, never fail to be an agent of healing in your midst. And you and I must be co-agents of that reconciliation.

The bishop's third task is Compassion. "Tend the flock of Christ," the Presiding Bishop will charge. "As [chief pastor], encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries." This is the role of Shepherd.

Let me tell you a true story. A certain young Canon to the Ordinary was much loved by his Diocese, much in demand for preaching and visiting in the parishes. When Christmas Eve rolled around, his presence would have been welcomed at the Cathedral, or at any of the cardinal parishes of the Diocese. Cutting a sharp figure in his purple cassock, he would have added luster to the liturgical pomp of Christmas Eve in a place with processions and fanfare. But it was to none of these places that the young Canon went. Year after year, in the still darkness of late evening, he would toss his vestments into the Toyota, and make the hour-long drive through the valleys to a tiny, struggling church that had no priest. There, in that forgotten mill town, he would bring the message to a few dozen worshippers that *they* were not forgotten. The Christmas message, the Incarnation of God's love in quiet, humble places – this was made real to them by one with a pastor's heart, a young canon who is now your new bishop. Perhaps they sang together the words of Phillips Brooks:

*where charity stands watching and faith holds wide the door,
the dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.* [Hymn 79]

Charity and faith. These are the tools of the bishop in the role of Shepherd, in the ministry of compassion. You have called a bishop with the heart of a pastor. Join with him in pastoring one another.

George, my colleague, mentor, and brother in Christ: please stand up.

In the Library of St. John's Church, Northampton, Massachusetts, a place well-known to you, there used to hang a curious artistic rendition of the Good Shepherd. It had that Victorian, sentimental style about it. In the picture, the shepherd is standing at the edge of a rocky ledge, reaching down precariously with one hand towards a little lamb who has strayed into danger. The shepherd is balancing himself with the other hand, which is holding a shepherd's crook. And that's the peculiar thing. Why isn't the shepherd using the crook? If it were just a walking stick, it wouldn't have that curved end. The crook is purposely designed to snag wayward sheep and keep them safe. Apparently the Good Shepherd of the Rocks has lost the owner's manual

for his crook and doesn't know how to use it! What the heck?! He's got a perfectly good tool, which he is failing to use.

George, this is the moment in the liturgy known as The Charge, and here is my charge to you.

First: Let the Good Shepherd of the Rocks be to you a cautionary image. Do not neglect to use the tools of your office. As bishop you will be vested with administrative authority, given a pulpit (164, actually!) for moral suasion, and empowered to administer the highest sacraments of our tradition. Never fail to use the tools of power entrusted to you. Use them for justice, reconciliation, and compassion.

Second: Be faithful in prayer, as we know you to be. Be faithful also in sabbath, as we know you want to be. The prayer of Consecration says that you are to "serve day and night" in this ministry. Do not take that phrase too literally! The flame-shaped thing they are about to put on your head is meant to symbolize the flame of the Holy Spirit, not the flame of burn-out. You must not allow the weight of administrative and liturgical duties to crush the life out of your pastoral heart.

Neither may you forget that, long before you took your ordination vows, you took another vow, and that vow has a beautiful face, and that vow has a name: Ruth. Apostolic Succession is an awesome gift – but that apostolic genealogy is not more important than the other family tree from which you draw the lifeblood of love. Be faithful in your prayer, and in your Sabbath.

Finally: Take your cue from the wonderful final paragraph of the profile which this Diocese drew up a year ago. "The brave heart that is not discouraged, the hopeful heart that makes the best of all things: this is the heart needed in our next bishop." George, by the grace of God, be that brave heart which is not discouraged, that hopeful heart which makes the best of all things.

Last of all, another Charge. A charge to the people of this Diocese.

Garrison Keillor once said, "Most couples deserve each other." This is not a marriage, but it is a covenanted relationship, and I believe that you want to deserve each other. Your new bishop must live up to the trust you bestow upon him this day. So also you must be the Diocese that mirrors the bishop for whom you yearn.

You have asked for a bishop who is "a person of prayer, who lives the faith." Pray with him, live that faith with him.

You have asked for a bishop who is "honorable, open, honest, and transparent in his dealings with the world." Be honorable and open with him.

You have asked for a "peacemaker and spiritual diplomat as [you] continue to heal from the difficult times." Engage in that peacemaking yourselves, ready for all the give and take required in any diplomacy, spiritual or otherwise.

Love one another, as Christ loves you. May this diocese and its bishop grow to mirror one another in trust and love. In so doing, by the grace of God, may you mirror the One whose name you proclaim.

This is our prayer; in Jesus' name. Amen.

ⁱ S. Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints* (London: Chiswick Press, 1877), p. 64.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*, p. 66.

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond Chapman, ed., *Godly and Righteous, Peevish and Perverse: Clergy and Religious in Literature and Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), pp. 192-193.

^{iv} The Rt. Rev. Barbara Harris, oft spoken.

^v Richard Rohr, OFM, "Beyond Crime and Punishment," in *Sojourners*, July/August 2002. (cited from online article 020711)

^{vi} Rohr, *ibid*