

# The end of the Anglican Communion?

George Weigel



WASHINGTON D.C. - There's an Anglican church, St. Luke's, a few blocks up Old Georgetown Road from my parish in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. St. Luke's recently posted a large sign on the church lawn: "No matter who you are, no matter what you believe, you are welcome at our table."

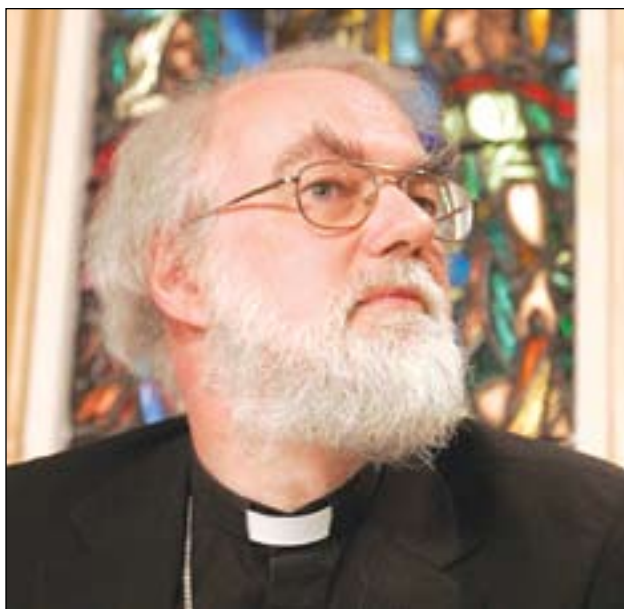
Which is, in one sense, a noble sentiment: if it's meant to convey that, look, we're all sinners, and no matter how awful you may think you are, you're welcome in the communion of Christ's Church if you're truly repentant. Judging from recent events in the Anglican Communion, however, St. Luke's sign isn't a synopsis of the parable of the prodigal son and his merciful father; it's a succinct, if unwitting, statement of why the Anglican Communion is coming apart at the seams.

No Catholic serious about the Catholic commitment to

the unity of Christ's Church can take any satisfaction from today's Anglican meltdown. It now looks as if John Henry Newman was right when he concluded that Anglicanism was not a "third branch" on the tree of historic Christian orthodoxy, of which the other branches were Catholicism and the Orthodox churches of the Christian east; rather, Newman decided, Anglicanism was Protestantism in English guise.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, as hopes for ecclesial reconciliation between Rome and Canterbury ran high, it seemed, briefly, as if Cardinal Newman might have been wrong. With the Anglican Communion now fracturing into a gaggle of quarreling communities no longer in communion with each other, it looks as if Newman had the deeper insight into what King Henry VIII wrought.

But neither the late cardinal nor the multi-uxorious king could have imagined that Anglicanism's breakup would result from some Anglicans' insistence that sodomy can be



Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, listens to a question at a news conference in Toronto April 16. Archbishop Williams announced that he will meet with U.S. Episcopal bishops in September. The Anglican Communion gave the U.S. Episcopal Church a Sept. 30 deadline to stop blessing same-sex unions.

sacramental.

Yet that is precisely what is happening. As Canada's finest Catholic commentator, Father Raymond de Souza, wrote last year (reflecting on the attempts of Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury, to hold the Anglican Communion together), "Some [Anglicans] argue that

[homosexual acts] are sinful; others that they are sacramental. This is an unbridgeable gap and it appears impossible for Canterbury to straddle it, try as he might." Archbishop Williams has tried mightily; he seems to have failed. There are indeed unbridgeable gaps, and it turns out that it does matter

what you believe, if you wish to be seated at "our table" – at least in the minds of the majority of the world's Anglicans, who disagree with the Episcopal Church USA's determination to bless same-sex unions and ordain practicing homosexuals to priestly and episcopal ministry.

An American Anglican clergyman, debating all this on PBS's "NewsHour," said that, if schism were the only answer, she and her Pasadena congregation would choose "the Gospel" over "the institutional Church." From a theological point of view, no more thoroughly Protestant posing of the issue could be imagined. And what does standing up for "the Gospel" have to do with embracing the Zeigeist of the more delirious suburbs of the People's Republic of California?

Shortly after Rowan Williams was named to Becket's chair, we spent a cordial 90 minutes together at Lambeth Palace, Canterbury's London headquarters. I gave him a copy of *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*; we spoke of John Paul's theology

of the body, and then fell to discussing the difference between "sacramental" and "gnostic" understandings of the human condition. The former insists that the stuff of the world – including maleness, femaleness, and their complementarity – has truths built into it; gnostics say it's all plastic, all malleable, all changeable. The sacramentalists believe that the extraordinary reveals itself through the ordinary: bread, wine, water, salt, marital love and fidelity; the gnostics say it's a matter of superior wisdom, available to the enlightened (which can mean, the politically correct). Archbishop Williams seemed convinced that the gnosticism of a lot of western high culture posed a great danger to historic Christianity and the truths it must proclaim.

He was right. The gnosticism that infects the Episcopal Church USA has just about driven the Anglican Communion over the cliff.

George Weigel is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

## Celebrating life inside the Communion of Saints

Father Ron Rolheiser



SAN ANTONIO, Texas - Recently, I led a memorial service for a friend who had died four years ago. Everyone who came to this service had also been at his funeral. Why another memorial service four years later? This is the background:

My friend had been diagnosed with a particularly aggressive type of cancer and was told by his doctors that his only chance for survival was to undergo a bone-marrow transplant which given his age, mid-50s, was a high risk. His chances, the doctors told him, were one in three. But that was his only real option.

The day before he went into the hospital to begin the transplant procedure he gathered a

number of family and friends around him to say goodbye, should this indeed be the end. We gathered at noon, had a simple lunch, took a short walk with him, huddled together while he took a needed siesta to gather his strength, and then took him to a chapel where we celebrated the Eucharist and gave him the anointing of the sick. We then went to his favorite restaurant for a long supper, a "last supper", at which he ate all his favorite foods and was able to express his gratitude and love for us and we were able to do the same for him. It was a great evening and we used every ritual we knew, earthly and sacramental, to try to make this farewell special.

The doctors were accurate in their predictions. He didn't make it. He died in recovery and so our supper with him was indeed a "last supper."

We had a large funeral for

him, laid him to rest according to his wishes in an unmarked grave in small rural cemetery within which there were only one or two other graves, and we all went home.

In the years that followed we prayed daily for him and then, after four years, some of us who had been at that original farewell decided to come together again in the same chapel and the same restaurant. But to do what? Why repeat a farewell we had already done? Why were we doing this?

Because basically all of us, either at some inchoate place in our hearts or at some more explicit place in our faith, believe in the communion of saints, namely, that our loved ones who have died are still in relationship to us and that this relationship continues to change and grow even after we are separated by death. And, given the truth of

that, we realized too that, at a time, a further kind of letting go was being asked of us. What is meant by this?

In the late 1970s, a Virginian writer, Sheldon Vanauken, wrote a book entitled, *A Severe Mercy*. It tells the story of love, of death, and of relating beyond death. As a young man still in his early 20s, he was blessed to find his soul mate, a woman he affectionately calls Davey.

Their love almost overpowered them in its singularity and yet, through it, they found God – and they also found C.S. Lewis (who became their spiritual director and mentor). But their earthly love was to be short-lived. Still in her mid-20s, Davey was stricken with cancer and died. Vanauken was disconsolate, beyond grief, in a darkness that had him contemplating suicide. Fortunately, he had C.S. Lewis as a spiritual guide.

After his wife's death, he had her body cremated and kept the ashes. As well, he carried her wedding ring in his pocket. One night, a couple of years after her death, he was on a ship crossing the Atlantic and he went outside at night, alone with her ashes and her wedding ring, to pray. In his prayer he got a clear signal from her that essentially said: "It's time for something new. Scatter the ashes lovingly into the ocean. Drop the wedding ring into the sea. Let go of the grief you are carrying! We will be together again in the future, but for now, on this earth, it's time to move on."

In essence, that's the reason we gathered again in memorial for our friend. After four years, we were hearing him say (however we hear these things in our hearts) that it was time to further scatter his ashes, to drop the wedding ring in the ocean,

to let go in a further way so that the mystery of a deeper love can continue to grow.

And it was a wonderful, joy-filled evening. We prayed, shared stories, drank wine, but mostly just laughed in gratitude because our lives had been so gifted by this man, William Manfield, whose warmth, love, humor, empathy, faith, and love for the Eucharist, helped make our own lives more bearable, more understandable, more joyous, more faith-filled, and more complete. He wasn't always Mother Theresa, he had some foibles she didn't, but, like her, he's now a saint and a saint with whom we got to celebrate the "last supper."

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser, theologian, teacher, and author, is President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He can be contacted through his website [www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com).