

Maintaining Bonds of Peace

A disciplinary rubric states, “If a priest knows that a person who is living a notoriously evil life intends to come to Communion, the priest shall speak to that person privately, and tell *him* that *he* may not come to the Holy Table until *he* has given clear proof of repentance and amendment of life” (BCP, p. 409). The same instruction applies when the offense is against a neighbor or a scandal to members of the congregation. Additionally, the priest may exercise a similar discipline if “there is hatred between members of the congregation.” Although rarely used, the general intention of this rubric should at least be considered.

The “Exhortation” in The Book of Common Prayer explains the seriousness of Holy Communion. “For, as the benefit is great, if with penitent hearts and living faith we receive the holy Sacrament, so is the danger great, if we receive it improperly, not recognizing the Lord’s Body. Judge yourselves, therefore lest you be judged by the Lord” (BCP, p. 316). This call to self-examination and the disciplinary rubric above highlight and protect the very purpose of Holy Communion. “For in these holy Mysteries we are made one with Christ, and Christ with us; we are made one body with him, and members one of another.” Notorious evil and hatred among members of the community are serious offenses to the mystical body of Christ.

The gospel reading from St. Matthew likely addressed church discipline at the time the gospel was composed. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have gained that one” (Matt. 18:15). If he refuses to listen, one or two witnesses are to confirm the charge. If he still refuses, he is to be brought before the community, and, if he refuses to hear the church, he is to be excommunicated as a Gentile and a

tax-collector. The final exclusion, however, may be softened by considering Jesus’s ministry precisely to Gentiles and tax-collectors. A later reconciliation may still be in view. These instructions do not intend to humiliate a member of the body. Instead, they are to help that member “listen” to the truth and “gain” him as a restored member of the community. Although harsh by modern church standards, the goal was to save and restore the member in the bonds of peace essential to the church community.

Every parish church and every parish priest ought to be vigilant in keeping the peace. While some measure of conflict and discord is normal and even healthy, too much of a good thing can spoil a parish. Conflicts and animosities of a dangerous sort should be addressed early. This requires incredible sensitivity and prudence, especially on the part of the priest. A priest must know when to be serious, light-hearted, willing to speak, ready to listen. There are laity who have gifts in this area as well.

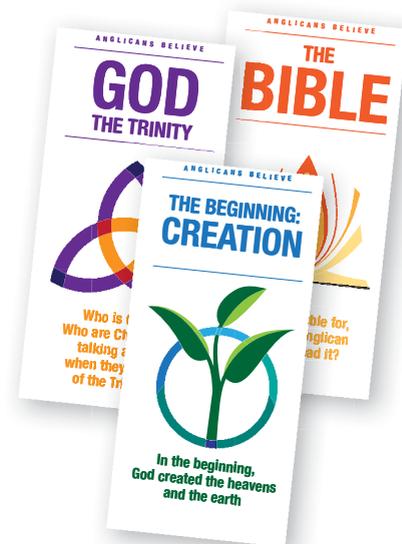
Why is church discipline, or, at least, the effort to maintain bonds of affection in a parish community so important? One answer is this: We are in a hurry! We cannot squander time with evil and hatred. “Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom. 13:11-13). Like the children of Israel eating their Passover in haste, we hurry toward the peaceable kingdom (Ex. 12:11). The peace of the Lord be always with you.

Look It Up

Read Psalm 149.

Think About It

We sing a new song *together*.



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