

## A LIVING AND DEVELOPING PATRIMONY: A HOMILY ON ACTS 10:17-33.

Fr. Christopher Phillips

It is one of my pleasant duties, as a pastor with a parish school, to teach a scripture course to our high school students. The centerpiece of the course is a chapter by chapter study of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The drama of the early years in the Church's history never fails to hold the attention of my students. As we work our way through Acts, we look for those "pivotal moments" – those individual and singular events which, from that moment, set the Church upon a particular path, and which frame our own experience as members of the Church. The Book of the Acts is filled with these exceptional moments, such as the account of which we heard in the First Lesson this evening.

Three men come to the house of Simon the tanner, where Peter was staying. They had been sent by the centurion, Cornelius. Now, God had been preparing Cornelius for a great destiny – Cornelius, the gentile, was being prepared to become part of the Church, which up until this point, was a preserve for Jews. In fact, not only was God preparing Cornelius, but He was also preparing Peter, who had lived as a Jew, but who at this point was beginning to understand that God's plan was not going to include these rigid demarcations. God had given Peter the vision of a great sheet with animals on it being let down from heaven, and a voice told him to kill and eat, even though many of these animals would be considered unclean and therefore unfit for a Jew to eat. In his vision, Peter was shocked. He protested that he had never eaten anything

that was unclean. The voice told him not to call what God had cleansed unclean.

There was a time when Peter would have called a Gentile unclean; but now God has prepared him for those visitors who were knocking on the door, sent by Cornelius, to beckon Peter to come to Caesarea, because Cornelius, too, had received a vision – to send for a man named Peter, and to listen to what he had to say. This was a pivotal moment – the Rock on which Christ was building His Church had come to understand that the Church would be tearing down those ancient boundaries between Jew and Gentile, in order to form the New Israel, a reconstituted Israel with a new understanding of what it is to be the Children of Abraham.

Cornelius called for Peter, and Peter responded. In so doing, God set the course for the Church. Barriers were broken down, and a new way of thinking began to unfold. At every pivotal moment in the Church's history, Peter is there, the person of the Pope, the Vicar of Christ, who carries the mission forward, keeping the Church ever ancient and ever new, as he's doing now, in our own day. It's sobering to think that we are part of something that will be read about and studied in the future. Perhaps it's not as groundbreaking as Peter bringing the gentile Cornelius into the Church, but what Pope Benedict XVI, speaking as Peter today, is enacting through the Apostolic Constitution *Anglicanorum coetibus* is providing one of those "pivotal moments" in the history of the Church. And even before this – to prepare for this moment – another successor of St. Peter, Pope John Paul II, had begun to incorporate our Patrimony into the Church through the Pastoral Provision and the Book of Divine Worship, and in so doing not only paved the way for the Ordinariates, but also allowed for a

glimpse of what the future will be like in the Ordinariates. What do I mean?

It struck me one day, when I was offering one of the early weekday Masses. Of the forty-five or fifty people who were there, very few of them had grown up in an Episcopal or Anglican church. The majority of them had belonged our parish for the greater part of their lives. For them, the Collect for Purity is simply a Catholic prayer said at the beginning of the Mass; the Comfortable Words are part of a Catholic penitential rite; the Prayer of Humble Access is what Catholics say before receiving Holy Communion. They don't think of their liturgy as coming from "someplace else." It's just a Catholic liturgy. Of course, they've attended other Catholic parishes. They know our liturgy is different, and that our parish has a particular "feel." But they've embraced and experienced the Anglican patrimony exclusively as Catholics, and in that way these second-generation Anglican Use Catholics probably have a clearer understanding of the patrimony as being a living and developing patrimony, than those of us who are first-generation converts. They haven't had to attempt to live as Catholics outside the communion of the Catholic Church, and they've never gone through the mental gymnastics we had to endure, trying to put a Catholic spin on things, when so much of the evidence around us was contrary to what we believed about ourselves.

The little experiment that is the Anglican Use, local though it is, gives a glimpse of the future, because the Ordinariates will be doing all this on a grand scale – oh, probably not grand at the beginning, but when second-generation Ordinariate Catholics become the majority of our members, there will be a much deeper understanding of our Anglican patrimony, because it will have been

experienced in the context of full communion with the Holy See.

Most of those heading toward an Ordinariate think in terms of what they'll be able to bring with them, and that's important. Our Lord said, "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost," and that applies to the various elements from our past. But the Lord also said, "Behold, I make all things new," and that, too, applies to our patrimony. Within the Ordinariates, all the familiar things we love will be made new, for a new generation of Catholics. Our past is building the future.

When St. Peter opened the Church to Cornelius and his family, it was an occasion of historic importance, clarifying and incarnating Christ's High Priestly prayer "that they all might be one." Our Lord wasn't expressing a vague hope when he prayed "Ut unum sint." It was a divine command, and it appears that the Holy Father is taking it as a direct and personal order from Christ himself.

*Fr. Christopher Phillips is the founding and continuing pastor of Our Lady of the Atonement Church in San Antonio, Texas. He preached this sermon at Solemn Evensong at the 2011 Anglican Use Conference at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Arlington, Texas.*