

On Being Servants for the Greater Cause: A Response to Stephen Noll on Rowan Cantuar

Michael Poon

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:
Temptation shall not come in this kind again
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.
The natural vigour in the venial sin
Is the way in which our lives begin.

...

While I ate out of the King's dish
To become servant of God was never my wish.
Servants of God has chance of greater sin
And sorrow, than the man who serves a king.
For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause serve them,
Still doing right: and striving with political men
May make that cause political, not by what they do
But by what they are.

(The words of Thomas Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury, in T S Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Part I)

I am grateful to Stephen Noll for responding to my article 'Farewell to Babel: Rowan Cantuar as Servant of Unity for the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Communion'. Stephen identifies several common concerns between us. Noll noted that we both plead 'the central authority of the Holy Scripture' in ecclesial life. I would hasten to add that the Communion world-wide, including the younger churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America, need to heed this call. The younger churches are equally in danger of 'replacing key teachings' of the historic faith by various forms of ideology. I shall attempt the following response in the spirit of friendly conversation across the continents.

Noll exhorts me 'Look not to Cantuar'. He points out that he differs with me on two counts: 'the present constitution of the office and the man who currently fills it.' Indeed, I would disagree on his response to the two questions above. Our disagreement however runs deeper. We part ways on how the questions should be framed in the first place. Noll's reasons for 'Look not to Cantuar' suggest that if the office of Canterbury were internationalised, and if a true man of God assumes office, then Noll would reverse his position and look to Cantuar. Well, I do not. I hold a more sober view on Canterbury. I simply commend his departure from the ideologues and encourage him to make good his promise to be a servant of unity for the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Communion. Servanthood means precisely servanthood. I do not use it as a code-word for *pontifex maximus*. To suggest that I ask Rowan Cantuar to be 'Primate of Primates' and 'the uniter of the Communion' would be a grave misunderstanding. Indeed, my response to Noll is 'Look not to Cantuar' or indeed any person to provide the final solution.

Let me explain. I do not think that authoritarian and structural proposals can cure the present woes of the Communion. I do not believe that even if a 'godly' archbishop – by Noll's standards – were in office, he should have 'the sole power to determine who's in and who's out of the Anglican Communion', or should 'read the riot act to the idolaters'. The Communion is never meant to be ordered primarily along institutional lines. Our bonds are primarily theological and missiological in nature. I fear that while most of what Stephen Noll advocates may be 'right', he is in danger of – to use T S Eliot's words in the *Murder of the Cathedral* – doing them for the

'wrong reasons'. Servants of God who are serving the greater cause have the chance of greater sin and sorrow, to make the cause serve them: 'Striving with political men / May make that cause political, not by what they do / But by what they are.' Christian leaders in the Global South are as much prone to such temptation as those in the West. I suppose that archbishops could still be murdered in cathedrals because they reject such means to serve the greater cause. 'The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God (James 1:20).'

Far from defending Rowan Williams and of enhancing his role, I suggest that we should consider each other's role with sober judgment (Romans 12:3). Rowan Williams has been chosen with due process to become the Archbishop of Canterbury. It happened; God allowed it. I have to accept this decision and work within this reality, in the same way that others accept us in discharging our present responsibilities and offices, unequal though we are to the high calling. The particular challenges and manner of discipleship that Rowan Williams assume as the Archbishop of Canterbury are best situated within the particular contexts of today. I take what he professes – as the Archbishop of Canterbury – in its face value, and hold him accountable to it. It is on that basis that I critically engage him to 'deliver the goods' – to act upon his own insight that he is 'servant' rather than 'focus' of the Communion.

More importantly, look not to Cantuar! It is to ourselves that Saint Paul asks each of us to examine with sober judgment. What does it mean for us to present our bodies as living sacrifice, and to be transformed by the renewal of our mind that we may prove what is the will of God for us today (Romans 12: 1-3)? Here, Noll points out that we need to discern the 'advance of Christianity' in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as we think through the future of the Communion. What are the advances? I believe that it is not simply a matter of the gravitational shift in Christian population. It is much more fundamental.

- (1) Churches in continents outside of Europe and North America must be understood and engaged as full partners in their own terms. We say farewell to the days when churches in the West would carve out their spheres of influences in the 'dark continents', and evaluate Christianity in mission fields along their own theological and ecclesiastical lines. 'Look not to the West' for benchmarks, even among the venerated men and women of God of yesteryears and of today.
- (2) Churches in the South can contribute to a renewed understanding of mission, and expose the dependence of the Anglican Communion on capitalistic values. Hitherto missionary activities followed the paradigm of East-West exchanges. Missionary activities adopted uncritically the idea of progress, as if the western world and churches can ride on the brute force of material wealth and technological superiority to proffer a post liberal understanding of secular state and human rights. Today, Christians outside of the west through their own cooperation – without resorting to financial help from the materially rich West – offer an example of how the church of God can triumph under different socio-political systems.
- (3) Churches in the South need to bring about a refreshed imagination and passion to the study of Christian doctrines, that young people today would rediscover the relevance of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* in the ordering of human societies. Orthodoxy is more than a matter of formal assent to formularies. Christians from every age must discern again for themselves the new battle lines in the socio-political realities of the day. Otherwise, we would simply be Christian tourists rather than pilgrims and confessors of the faith, as if we have fought the fight with Saint Peter by having a holiday in Vatican. The South to South Encounter Communiqué raises the concern for better coordination in theological education. I believe churches in the South need to deepen their reflection on their own

particular pilgrimage alongside the nation building processes. Such lines of reflection would help Christians to recover a social vision for their societies and nations.

Should we continue to engage the west? I believe so, even from our 'opponents'; and in particular, they help to spur us on to give a coherent account of human sexuality and more importantly, an understanding of the church.

Finally, what do I expect of Canterbury today? Well, nothing more and nothing less than what we should expect from a Primate of the Church of England; nothing more and nothing less than what we should expect from an archbishop. He is required to publicly renounce the ideological reshaping of the Communion that puts him to be the focus of unity. He must uphold the decisions of the Dromantine Communiqué. He should discharge the duties of his office. Above all, he must teach; even so we are required to discern and test all spirits. At the same time, we who are lesser mortals in our idyllic existence in academic institutions (or monastic cells!) need to be charitable to him, and work together with him in good faith. For the temptations that face servants of the greater cause do sorely lurk among the corridors in Lambeth, even were at work among former chairs who armed themselves with breastplates of sterling evangelical formularies.

Ash Wednesday 2006