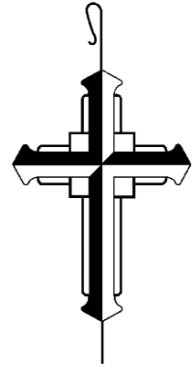


The Bishop's Journal

The gift of tradition



The words traditional and contemporary are bandied about quite often in church circles today – usually in the context of worship practices. Sadly, the conversation often ends up making a rather stark value judgment where the contemporary is, by default, viewed as being superior to the traditional.

There is much about so-called contemporary worship practices that are highly commendable. The church's spiritual life has been enriched immeasurably in recent years through the introduction of contemporary hymnody, prayers and liturgical formulas. New insights from a variety of disciplines have been incorporated into our worship experiences in ways that have made them more accessible to the general population. All of this is very good!

At the same time, I fear losing touch with the broader and deeper culture – the tradition – that has formed us into the people we are today. I realize that, for some, the word tradition carries a whiff of mothballs about it. Things described as traditional are seen as being dated, quaint or somehow inferior to that which is contemporary. I also think that's too bad, for in making such judgments, we miss out on receiving some very significant gifts that the treasure chest of tradition has to offer us.

The primary benefit of tradition is the enrichment it brings to our present context. A people of tradition don't, for instance, have to content themselves with only singing the songs of this present age. They can travel through time and sing praises with the saints of every time and

place! When addressing new and unique theological challenges, they can rely on a perspective that is infinitely greater than that which is provided solely by our contemporary thought processes. When trying to figure out why we do the things we do, a people of tradition can actually trace a route through time and culture and move toward a fuller understanding of this contemporary moment.

By connecting us with a wider community of faith, tradition also provides a helpful check and balance. It keeps us honest! G.K. Chesterton puts it this way. "Tradition may be defined as an extension of the franchise of democracy. Tradition, means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men begin disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death."

That's just one of the marvelous gifts of being a church of "all times and places!" Simply stated, our grandparents get a vote! They don't get a veto, but they do get a say in the things we do today. Likewise, we will get a vote – not a veto – in the affairs of our grandchildren. We will become a living part of the legacy that will form their tradition! We will become a living part of their unique version of contemporary! Pretty neat, eh?

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