

From the Bishop of Egypt's Address to the House of Bishops

Friday, September 21, 2007

**“For the first time in centuries,
the fabric of our Communion is torn ...”**

Mouneer Anis, Bishop of the Episcopal/Anglican Diocese of Egypt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal/Anglican province of Jerusalem and the Middle East to the House of Bishops in New Orleans.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you so much for inviting me here to come and listen to you and for giving me the opportunity to share my heart with you. I am very aware of my own shortcomings and weaknesses, but every word I want to say is out of love and concern for the unity of the Church of Christ.

I do not come with great authority, nor am I the primate of a province with a great number of Anglicans; I do however, come from a region where Christ walked and where the Church was born. I come representing the Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East.

The Church in this region has faced many challenges since the first century. Our brothers and sisters in the early centuries were ready to sacrifice their very lives to stay true to the Faith they received from the Lord and his Apostles. Their blood was not in vain; rather it became the seed of the Church across our entire region. Many disputes and heresies took place in our region. In face of all the challenges, persecutions, and heresies our ancestors—people like St. Athanasius, St. Clement, Origen, and Cyril from Alexandria, along with Tertullian, Cyprian, and St. Augustine from North Africa—kept the faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. We are constantly learning from our ancient martyrs and forebearers how to serve the Kingdom of God faithfully.

Today our Anglican Church in the Middle East still lives within a very exciting and challenging context. We live among the Oriental Orthodox, the Greek Orthodox, the Catholics, the Jews and the Muslims. We greatly value our ecumenical relations and continue to work for unity.

We also deeply respect and appreciate our Muslim friends and value our interfaith relations while in no way compromise our faith. I have to tell you that many of these relations were severely strained after your decision to consecrate Gene Robinson as bishop in 2003. We are seen as the new heretics and this has hindered our ecumenical and interfaith relations as well as our mission in the region

My friends, like you, we want to be relevant to the culture in which we live. More importantly, we want to be salt and light to our societies. That is not an easy calling but it means we must remain distinct and humble at the same time. Without being distinct we cannot be salt and light; without humility we will not represent the one who said, “I am meek and lowly in heart.” We are also continuously challenged whether we should allow the culture to transform the Apostolic Faith we once received, or if we should allow the Gospel of Jesus Christ to transform our culture as it has in the past. As we struggle to answer this question we must never divorce ourselves from the faith that countless men, women and children died to protect. I

believer that if we faithfully serve the Church of Christ, He will continue to fulfill his promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail against her.

Rupertus Meldenius said, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity”. Our hope is to be united on the essentials of faith which are defined only by the whole church. WE are not in any way trying to impose rigid views on you. Like you we celebrate diversity, but we believe that such diversity should not be unlimited and should not contradict the essentials of our faith. We are not schismatic, but we are diligent to preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. We want unity but not unity at any expense.

Anglicans are aware with humility that we are not “the” church but we are one member of the body of Christ, the one Holy Catholic Church. We proclaim this every week in our churches. This places upon us the responsibility to listen to and respect our ecumenical partners.

My friends, you may believe you have discovered a very different truth from that of the majority in the Anglican Communion. It is not just about sexuality, but about your views of Christ, the Gospel, and the authority of the Bible. Please forgive me when I relay that some say you are a different church, others even think that you are a different religion.

I understand that it is difficult for you in your context to accept the standard teaching of the Anglican Communion. That is why you refused to accept Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10. You also ignored all the warnings of the Primates in 2003, 2004, and 2005. Your response to the Windsor Report is seen by the Primates as not clear. You cannot say you value being a member of the Anglican Communion while you ignore the interdependence of the member churches. The interdependence is what differentiates us from other congregational churches. I would like to remind you and myself with the famous resolution number 49 of the Lambeth Conference of 1930 which declares “the Anglican Communion is a fellowship of churches that...are bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the bishops in conference.” With respect, I have to say that those who would prefer to speak of laws and procedures, constitutions and canons, committees and process: you are missing the point! It is our mutual loyalty and fellowship, submitting to one another in the common cause of Jesus Christ that makes us of one Church one faith and one Lord.

It is clear that your actions have resulted in one of the most difficult disputes in the Communion in our generation. You may see them as not core doctrinal issues. Many like me see the opposite but the thing that we all cannot ignore is that these issues are divisive and have created a lot of undesired consequences and reactions. For the first time in centuries, the fabric of our Communion is torn. Our energies have been drained and our resources are lost and it is difficult for both of us to continue like this.

My friends, if you really believe that the truth revealed to you is different from that shown to the rest of the Communion, then you need to uphold that claim with boldness even at the risk of losing unity. If you think it is right and necessary to ordain and consecrate practicing homosexuals and that you should bless same sex partnerships or even marriages, you should be true to what you believe is right and accept the consequences.

However, if you appreciate being members of the global Anglican family, then you have to walk along side the members of your family. Those who say it is important to stay together around the table, to listen to each other and to continue our dialogue over the difficult issues that are facing us are wise. We wholeheartedly agree with this, but staying around the table requires that you should not take actions that are contrary to the standard position (Lambeth 1.10) of the rest of the Communion.

Sitting around one table requires humility from all of us. One church cannot say to the rest of churches “I know the whole truth, you don’t”. Archbishop Rowan reminded us in his paper “Challenge and Hope” that “the whole truth is revealed to the whole church”. Sitting around one table requires that each one should have a clear stance before the discussion starts. It also requires that true openness and willingness to accept the mind of the whole. We do not have to be in the communion to sit around the one table. We do so when we dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox and with other faiths. It would be extremely difficult to sit around one table when you have already decided the outcome of the discussion and when you ignore the many voices, warnings and appeals from around the communion.

Today I appeal to you to respond with great clarity to the requests that were made in Dar Es Salaam. If you accepted the Primates’ recommendations, would you be able to give assurances to the Executive Committee of the General Convention of TEC would ratify your response? It is the responsibility of the bishop to guard the faith as we promise during our consecration. In many of not most parts of the Communion and the historic churches, present and ancient, matters of faith and order, is the responsibility and therefore the authority of the Bishops to safeguard and teach.

If you don’t commit yourself to the Dar Es Salaam recommendations would you be willing to walk apart at least for a period during which we continue our discussions and dialogue until we reach a common understanding, especially about the essentials of our faith? Forgive me when I say that for many of us in the Communion, we feel that you have already walked apart at least theologically from the standard teaching of the Communion.

I know that you value personal freedom and independence. The whole world learns this from you. You need to demonstrate this by securing freedom for the American orthodox Anglicans who do not share your theological direction. Show your spirit of inclusiveness when you deal with them. I am afraid to say that without this more and more interventions from other provinces is going to happen. No one wants this.

I pray for wisdom and grace, for myself as well as for you, and I pray that God will lead us both in the right direction. Remember the illustrious history of God’s church and remember future generations who will sit in judgment on us. Remember also that the whole world is waiting and watching what you do. Please forgive me if I have said anything that offends you.

May the Lord bless you.

+Mouneer Egypt