

Good Shepherd: Fighting For Orthodox Anglicanism

By Dr. Arthur Waldron

Published in The Bulletin on March 13, 2009

In what will be a heartbreak for its parishioners and clergy alike, the landmark Church of the Good Shepherd, which has stood since 1894 just south of Lancaster Pike and now across from Rosemont Plaza shopping center, could be closed within the next few months as the result of a lawsuit brought by the Standing Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. Good Shepherd attempted to negotiate the differences between itself and the Diocese, but the Diocese and the national Church would prefer to see an empty building, i.e. St. James the Less in East Falls. Indeed, Mrs. Katherine Schori, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, has testified that she would prefer to see an Episcopal church converted to a saloon rather than be used as an orthodox Anglican church. With other Episcopal churches in the Diocese losing members, the Diocese knows that an empty building will result from their "successes" in the litigation.

The saga of Good Shepherd is both deep Main Line and part of a drama now being played out in the worldwide Anglican Communion, which looks to the Archbishop of Canterbury as its head.

The present church building was a donation to the already-established parish by Harry Banks French, of the company then called Smith, Kline, and French, as a memorial to his wife, Augusta Graham French, who had died in March 1892 and their son, Harry Banks French II, who died in May of the same year. The name "Good Shepherd" evokes the Christian image of Jesus caring for little children like baby lambs.

From the beginning, Good Shepherd was an outpost in America of the movement, begun in the 19th century at Oxford University, that called upon Anglicans to recognize and cherish their Catholic heritage, always present, but neglected after Henry VIII separated the Church of England from the pope and Rome in 1534. Philadelphia was long a bastion of that movement with its "seven sisters" Anglo-Catholic parishes including, among others, the jewel-like St. James the Less (now closed by the diocese) and — perhaps most famous of all — the beautiful "shrine church" on Cherry Street, St. Clement's.

Bennett Hill, a retired teacher, long-time parishioner, and historian of the parish has summed up Good Shepherd in three phrases. First is "orthodoxy," which is to say faithful adherence to the Christian faith, little different from that of Roman Catholics or the Eastern Orthodox, found in the Bible, and the ancient creeds and traditions of the Church. Second is "the beauty of holiness," which is to say to make worship as beautiful as can be made: Good Shepherd uses vestments, candles and incense in its liturgies and has fine music (though no professional choir). Finally, Mr. Hill lists "undying commitment to mission work;" Good Shepherd supports missionaries overseas, but the church also participates in soup kitchens and similar work in Philadelphia. In the 19th century, the church started a hospital, The Home and Hospital of the Good Shepherd, the first on the Main Line, which existed for 50 years. Good Shepherd is the "Mother Church" of three parishes it founded: Good Samaritan (Paoli), St. Martin's (Radnor) and Christ Church (Villanova).

To this could be added a certain lack of interest in the social dimensions once so important in church going. Good Shepherd never charged pew rent. Today, the congregation is a real slice of America in its diversity. Parish life is a whirl of activity, from worship to coffee hours to a Mardi Gras party, but all somehow adult. The congregation is there for only one reason: because they consider the church to be the real thing—straight, no chaser.

Churches like Good Shepherd, however, have been attacked in recent years owing to immense changes in the doctrines and practices of the hierarchy of the Episcopal Church. Orthodoxy is questioned or even scorned: (now disgraced) former Bishop Charles Bennison of Philadelphia dismissed Scripture with the words, "we wrote the Bible, we can re-write it." Morality now includes sexual activity outside of marriage even among priests and bishops. (Bishop Bennison was removed when it transpired that he had been aware that his brother, also a priest, was sexually abusing a minor, but had done nothing.)

The attempt to impose such changes has been resisted globally, with the result that the Anglican Communion today is split in many directions. One consequence: The Episcopal Church in the United States, once a respected, affluent and dead-serious denomination, is facing a hemorrhage of membership and a collapse in finances, to the extent that the landmark Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., are running substantial deficits. Four entire dioceses have seceded from the Episcopal Church, while at least two new ones are in the process of formation, one led by Robert Duncan, the bishop of Pittsburgh.

Now the diocese is coming to get Good Shepherd. On a typical Sunday morning, one would never guess that fact: The congregation is focused entirely on the worship. The church is a tranquil place, hallowed by more than a century of prayer, a deep well of spirituality drilled to the bedrock. But the congregation and clergy know what may be coming, and — though they worry, for example, about the fate of the exquisite Lady Chapel, the antique Christmas crèche, the stained glass windows, some remembering relatives, some children who died young, one a soldier killed a few hours before the armistice that ended World War I — all gifts from the faithful for nearly a century and a half. Perhaps they worry most deeply about the many dead whose eternal rest in the peaceful Columbarium may now be rudely ended.

But it speaks volumes for how utterly the official Episcopal Church has changed that in the Hymnal 1940, the gold standard of church music if ever such existed, one finds the beautiful “Good Shepherd, Rosemont.” That witnesses how close to the heart of the church the parish once was. That hymn does not appear, however, in the totally revised book put out by today’s Episcopal Church in 1982.

The rector, Bishop David L. Moyer, continues in the same ministries that he has done at Good Shepherd since his coming to Good Shepherd in 1989. Nothing has changed. The congregation continues to support him as he ministers to the congregation. The only change is the threat of the diocese to expel the congregation from their church and to throw Fr. Moyer and his family out of their home.

The heart-rending question for the faithful at Good Shepherd is: will their parish, like that beloved hymn titled after it, now be eliminated as well?

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