

Catholic Order, Tractarian Piety, and the Vision Glorious

Robin Ward remembers Geoffrey Rowell

I want to begin today by talking about the beginning: Alton in Hampshire, where Bishop Geoffrey was brought up and where he learned the Faith. Alton was a place where a very remarkable ministry took place: the ministry of the carpenter priest Charlie Bond. It is described to us in Roger Lloyd's famous book *The Church of England, 1900–1965*. There is a chapter about parish life in which he compares that parish with some of the great Anglo-Catholic slum parishes in London, to show that the Tractarian movement was able to preach, teach, and show the best of catholic practice in the country as well as in the cities. There is a very moving point in Lloyd's description of parish life there in which Bond is hearing a confession. There is no confessional: he sits on a chair behind the communion rail and the penitent kneels. A person comes into the church and sees this scene, and above the place where the confession is being heard, the person coming into the church sees an angel. Bishop Geoffrey has always seemed to me to be very much someone who is an Anglican after the spirit of Lloyd's great book. He saw in the Church of England catholic order and Tractarian piety leading to a tangible manifestation of the vision glorious. He always had that before him throughout his ministry. So by beginning in that place, with those people, and in that time, we see the clue to his effectiveness.

Bishop Geoffrey was always, as Newman said, 'a link between persons'. He was not particularly interested in systematic theology, philosophy and so forth. He was a person who understood theology in terms of the relation between people and places. A friend of mine once wrote a tutorial essay for him about Matthew Arnold. It gave a tremendous conspectus, so my friend thought, of the cultural influences of Arnold in the nineteenth century. He read his essay to Bishop Geoffrey, at the conclusion of which Geoffrey paused for about a minute and then said, 'Did you know that Matthew Arnold was Keble's godson?' It would be quite unfair, I think, to see Bishop Geoffrey's theological outlook as limited to prosopographical minutiae. He was a person who was a great teacher because he loved what he taught and he inhabited it from within. His preaching, teaching and understanding of the Oxford Movement was unparalleled. Oxford was very fortunate to have both him and Ian Ker teaching about Newman at the same time, although it might be said that some of the less perceptive undergraduates, listening to Bishop Geoffrey about Mr Newman of Oriel, who appeared to have died about 1845, and Dr Ker about Father Newman of Birmingham, who appeared to have come from nowhere at about the same time, might never have known that they were actually the same person.

Bishop Geoffrey was not limited in his deep and profound knowledge of Anglicanism and the Oxford Movement, because his love of travel was something that brought him into contact with the Orthodox. That was the second way in which his theological acumen and intelligence served the Church. He got on very well with the Orthodox. He had no sympathy, I think, for a model of episcopacy that meant sitting in front of the computer, tapping away at emails and drawing up policies. He loved the way in which the Orthodox bishops were shepherds and pastors of their flock, who were dedicated to their work and approached their ministry in a deeply spiritual way. He had a great empathy with them, and he did great work with them. We think particularly of the way in which he was able, in his work with the Oriental Orthodox, to bring about substantive ecumenical agreement. I have to say that I always rather dreaded when Bishop Geoffrey went on his travels, especially when he was Chair of the House Council of St Stephen's House. He would come back with wonderful stories, but also wonderful initiatives. I recall that on one day a man had nearly sold him a

portable curling ring to put up in the cloister of St Stephen's House, when we were a bit strapped for cash. 'There's money in curling,' he told me. We never let him be a signatory for the cheque book. He did have a splendid empathy with people: people he met on trains, people he met on aeroplanes, people he met in all sorts of different contexts, in which he drew together rich things to bring back to his home ministry.

Bishop Geoffrey loved being a bishop and always wanted to be a bishop, and he loved being a doctor of divinity of this university. But he didn't have it easy: it would be wrong to think that he just lived in a cloistered setting. I would not have wanted to have been a young priest sitting opposite A. J. Ayer at New College in the early 1970s night after night at dinner – an intimidating prospect. He was, of course, Chaplain of Keble, an institution which he loved, at a time when that institution was having to come to terms with the change from a Tractarian institution into an institution much more like the other colleges of the University. The fact that he worked with Dennis Nineham in that place demonstrates the way in which Bishop Geoffrey had to testify to his vision of Anglicanism in a greatly changing scene.

Bishop Geoffrey was also very much a Cuddesdon person. He loved the equanimity, if you like, of the old Cuddesdon. As a bishop, and in the latter years of his life, he loyally supported many catholic organizations and catholic societies – the Society of the Holy Cross, Pusey House, St Stephen's House, and so forth. His home was not really with that combative Anglo-Catholicism, but he always committed himself, in the changed context of the Church of England in our time, to moving beyond what he would have seemed in his youth to support and work for and uphold, for the sake of the catholic order which was at the heart of his understanding of Anglicanism.

Bishop Geoffrey's work as a priest was very much inspired by people like Eric Abbott of Westminster. It would be wrong not to mention, at the conclusion of this account of what he brought to the catholic movement in the Church of England, his work as a spiritual director and a confessor. He would be appalled by the way in which the seal of the confessional is now being challenged in the Church of England. He was a great testimony in his own life and work to the great good that is done by those priests who dedicate themselves to spiritual direction and spiritual counselling and to the work of confession.

Bishop Geoffrey loved Pusey House. Pusey House was one of those institutions in his life which remained stable in its identity and stable in the way in which it taught and preached the values he most loved. It is very fitting that we should be here today to celebrate his legacy, but it is also very fitting that we should be here, of course, to pray for him – to pray that he might have refreshment, light and peace in the presence of the Lord he served so faithfully.

The Revd Canon Dr Robin Ward, Principal of St Stephen's House, Oxford, and President of the Dr Pusey Memorial Fund, gave this address at the requiem for Bishop Geoffrey Rowell celebrated at Pusey House in June 2016 to mark his 'year's mind'.