

It's My Fault that Leander Harding is not a Bishop

We all have hobbies. My friend and colleague Leander Harding seems to like to run in episcopal elections. I don't know how many times he has run, but he likely holds some kind of a record, and he has never won. Actually, he does not seem to run, so much as people keep nominating him. In the last few months, he was nominated in both the Episcopal Diocese of the Rio Grande (New Mexico) and the Episcopal Diocese of Springfield (Illinois). In both cases, the clergy and laity chose candidates who were (speaking strictly objectively) both pastorally and academically less qualified than Leander to be a bishop. I speculate as to why this is the case, but have been convinced that the problem is that he is too orthodox, and too smart. The elected bishop in Rio Grande (formerly an orthodox Episcopal diocese) is a revisionist, and I expect this means the end of orthodoxy in that diocese, as orthodox parishes will either leave for the ACNA or will die.

Over at Virtueonline, David Virtue noticed this anomaly, and posted a piece on his blog asking about why it is that in the Episcopal election at Springfield, not only Leander, but other far more qualified candidates, like Robert Munday, Dean of Nashotah House, were passed by. The very first comment to appear was by the Rev. Tom Woodward of Santa Fe, NM, a retired Liberal Protestant priest who lives in the Diocese of Rio Grande. Tom and I had met before online. Tom wrote to respond to Virtue's column about Springfield, but in passing offered some interesting information about why Leander Harding was not elected in Rio Grande.

I hope I can assure you that M____. and D____. will receive consents across the board. Both are solidly conservative on matters theological and both have a history of respectful dialogue with leaders from all segments of the Episcopal

Church.

It is clear that the candidates you prefer would not receive consents from any but the most right wing of dioceses. Harding is now licensed by ACNA and told the Diocese of the Rio Grande that he has no intentions of revoking it or of separating himself from Wm. Witt and others on the Trinity faculty who have been unrelenting in their disparaging of the Episcopal Church. Dean Munday and Fr. Cox have been less than enthusiastic about their relationship to the doctrine, worship and governance of the Episcopal Church. And so on.

It appears that Springfield is committed to its future and vocation within the Episcopal Church – and that it has selected three nominees who share that commitment – disagreeing with some of the direction of TEC, not disparaging but addressing those with whom they disagree with respect and in love.

I responded:

I am both surprised and pleased that Tom Woodward of Santa Fe has singled me out as being “unrelenting” in my criticism (not disparaging) of TEC, as well as someone from whom Leander Harding should disassociate himself.

At the same time, I am simply amused that Woodward would describe Harding’s and presumably my own views as “most right wing.” I have long advocated that the political terminology of “right wing” and “left wing” is entirely inappropriate in what are primarily theological disagreements. I have taught Christian Ethics in the Diocese of Rio Grande’s extension program, and Woodward can ask the students who took my course just how “right wing” I am.

The key issue is theological, and in past debates with Woodward, this has become clear. Specifically, it has to do with Christology and the atonement: are the person and work

of Christ constitutive of a salvation that can be found nowhere else, or are they illustrative of a salvation that can be found elsewhere, and even perhaps everywhere? Put more bluntly, can we affirm that Jesus saves and that Jesus alone saves? KJS's repeated affirmations that Jesus is "a way" and not "the way" of salvation makes clear where SHE stands, as has Woodward in past discussions.

Politics? I am neither "left wing" nor "right wing" by the standards of today's culture wars, but a Barthian Thomist. The current situation in TEC is exactly parallel to the issue that Barth and the Confessing Church faced in Nazi Germany and addressed in the Barmen Declaration. Is Jesus Lord or is Caesar Lord? Both right wing and left wing have their Caesars.

Anyway who has read my blog should know where I stand on these things. Although he probably does not realize it, Woodward has slandered both myself and Leander Harding, but I will accept his statement as a compliment.

Unfortunately, Virtue deleted the rest of Woodward's comments, but we continued to interact for some time, with Woodward continuing his criticism of Trinity and its faculty as extreme, and outside the mainstream of Anglicanism, criticizing its Board, its doctrinal statement, and also its name change – from Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry to Trinity School for Ministry.

The deleted comments were not perhaps so interesting, but Woodward's initial comment is, because of what it says about the mindset of the liberal establishment in The Episcopal Church, but also about how they view their task in the Episcopal Church.

First, it is annoying that the revisionists continues to view the disagreement as a primarily political rather than theological one. According to Woodward, Leander Harding could

not receive consents, except in the “most right wing of dioceses.” I have complained for years that viewing the current disagreement in terms of the political categories of “left wing” and “right wing” is useless because the disagreement is not about politics, but about theology, that such categories are constantly shifting, and they do not say anything meaningful about the person to which they are applied, except insofar as they indicate a dislike for the person.

More significantly, Woodward’s comment illustrates that “Neuhaus’s Law” now operates in The Episcopal Church. (Neuhaus’s Law is an axiom of the late Richard John Neuhaus that “Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will become prohibited.”)

But if Woodward’s statement is accurate, TEC has now gone beyond Neuhaus’s Law. For orthodox believers in the Episcopal Church, it is now no longer enough to remain a member of The Episcopal Church, and to promise not to leave, and to work with the opposition—all of which I am certain Leander promised the Diocese of Rio Grande. Rather, it is now the case that one cannot disagree with the liberal leadership of The Episcopal Church or “disparage” TEC. (And to “disparage” The Episcopal Church simply means to criticize the liberal leadership or to disagree with its theology or policies.) Moreover, one must also disassociate from those (like myself) who have publicly criticized that leadership and from orthodox Anglican seminaries like TSM. And, finally, one must have nothing to do with those who have left TEC, and may not provide them with support or ministry in any way. As Woodward makes clear, one of the chief complaints about Leander was that he had provided pastoral support in ACNA parishes in the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

Finally, it shows that, having accomplished their initial goal of having their views made the official theology of The Episcopal Church, the revisionist leadership is now willing to

take the next step of silencing the opposition. It is now no longer enough for orthodox Episcopalians to promise to remain in TEC, and to support it financially. They must not verbally express disagreement with its new theology or policy.

There seems to be a kind of mutual cluelessness about authoritarians—whether of the “left-wing” or the “right-wing.” They cannot abide criticism, and cannot perceive that their very intolerance is a major cause of that which they so dislike.