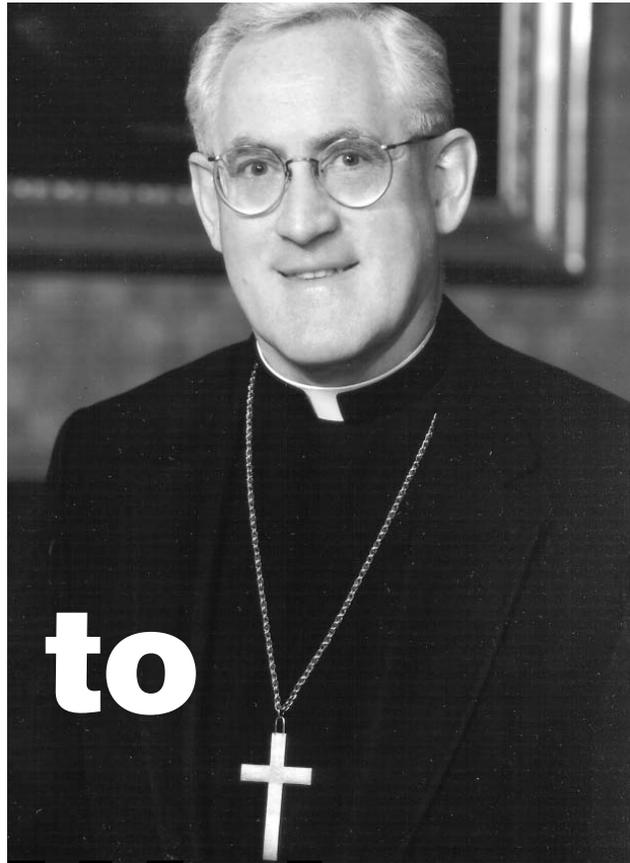


A new convert to the Catholic Church is alarmed by goings-on in his local cathedral and asks his Bishop for an explanation.



Letter to Bishop William Weigand

Craig Heimbichner
1852 Tracy Lane
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The Most Reverend William K. Weigand
Bishop of Sacramento
Office of the Bishop
Diocesan Pastoral Center
2110 Broadway
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January 17, 2001

Your Excellency:

I have recently heard that an Episcopalian priest will be appearing in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament this Sunday, possibly to give a sermon, or perhaps to share in the celebration of the Mass. Knowing that, as a Successor of the Apostles, you have been charged, like Timothy, to “fight the good fight of faith” (I Tim. 6:12), I come to you looking for wisdom and courage in these times of confusion.

Undoubtedly your Excellency is aware of the letter of Pope Leo XIII, *Apostolicae Curiae*, Sept. 13, 1896, which states with infallible dogmatic authority the complete invalidity of the Anglican (and hence Episcopalian) priesthood: “We pronounce and declare that ordinations enacted according to the Anglican rite have hitherto been and are invalid and entirely void...” Hence, an Episcopalian priest is a layman in priestly garments. Surely his appearance next to a

Catholic priest in a Mass would be a source of great confusion to the faithful, who will draw the unwarranted conclusion that the person is a priest. In addition, Episcopalians in attendance may believe that full participation in the liturgy will mean their personal reception of the Eucharist—something expressly forbidden by Canon Law,* not to mention Divine Law. These risks are real. I should know: before I converted, I, as a Protestant, received the Eucharist in a Catholic Church. Nor am I the only one to have done so.

Second, while your Excellency is undoubtedly of good will in following the recent ecumenical directives, we among the faithful are completely confused about these events. We are aware, for example, that Pope Pius XI, in *Mortalium Animos*, Jan. 6, 1928, utterly condemned interfaith meetings and ecumenical sharing on doctrinal grounds, holding these meetings not only forbidden, but equivalent to—in his words—a rejection of the true idea of religion—that is, apostasy. He writes, “Such efforts can meet with no kind of approval among Catholics. They presuppose the erroneous view that all religions are more or less good and praiseworthy, inasmuch as all give expression, under various forms, to that innate sense which leads men to God and to the obedient acknowledgement of His rule. Those who hold such a view are not only in error; they distort the true idea of religion, and thus reject it....To favor this opinion, therefore, and to encourage such undertakings is tantamount to abandoning the religion revealed by God.”

Pope Pius XI did not merely make a disciplinary directive in this Encyclical, but appealed to the unchanging Deposit of Faith, citing the Bible as his witness. He was aware of the argument for these meetings made on the grounds of love, and addressed that argument with his authority: “These pan-Christians who strive for the union of the churches would appear to pursue the noblest of ideals in promoting charity among all Christians. But how should charity tend to the detriment of faith? Everyone knows that John himself, Apostle of love, who seems in his Gospel to have revealed the secrets of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and who never ceased to impress upon the memory of his disciples the new commandment “to love one another,” nevertheless strictly forbade any intercourse with those who professed a mutilated and corrupt form of Christ’s teaching. ‘If any man come to you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into the house, nor say to him, God speed you’ (II Jn. 10).”

It appears impossible to reconcile St. John’s directive to “receive him not into the house” with an action to “receive” an Episcopalian minister “into the house of God,” since the Episcopalian faith is indeed a “mutilated and corrupt form of Christ’s teaching.” Your Excellency, can you reconcile these matters?

Undoubtedly the present Holy Father has taken a new direction from that marked out by Pope Pius XI, and, for that matter, St. John in his Epistle. The present Holy Father surely speaks with the voice of the Authentic Magisterium and deserves our respect. Moreover, his appeal to the Second Vatican Council brings us to documents which are without question the basis for this new direction—a direction which is an obvious and clearly complete reversal from the pronouncements just quoted. Undoubtedly the documents of Vatican II belong to the Authentic Magisterium—yet not every act of the Authentic Magisterium embraces the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium, the Deposit of Faith, which has been entrusted to the Pope and the Successors of the Apostles to preserve with all care. Pastoral directives of the nature of the Vatican Council II *Decree on Ecumenism* were explicitly denied dogmatic status by Pope Paul VI himself, who said, “There are those who ask what authority, what theological qualification the Council intended to give to its teachings....The answer is known by whoever remembers the conciliar declaration of March 6, 1964, repeated on November 16, 1964: Given the Council’s pastoral character, it avoided pronouncing, in an extraordinary manner, dogmas endowed with the note of infallibility.”

* [Editor’s Note: Actually, what is called “Eucharistic hospitality” is allowed in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* (Canon 844). Of its five paragraphs, the operative one is §3: “Catholic ministers may lawfully administer the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick to members of the eastern Churches not in full communion with the catholic Church, if they spontaneously ask for them and are properly disposed. The same applies to members of other Churches which the Apostolic See judges to be in the same position as the aforesaid eastern Churches so far as the sacraments are concerned.”

If, however, the decree of Pope Pius XI is a doctrinal condemnation of ecumenism, how can it be seen as lacking the charism of infallibility which belongs to the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium, which demands not merely human but divine faith? Such a conclusion follows from the definitions of Vatican I: “All those things are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith which are contained in the Word of God, written or handed down, and which the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by her ordinary and universal teaching (*magisterium*), proposes for belief as having been divinely revealed.”

On the other hand, the same Council declared that doctrinal innovations on the part of the Pope do not have the authority or protection of the Holy Spirit: “For the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter, that by His revelation they might make known new doctrine, but that by His assistance they might inviolably keep and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith delivered through the Apostles.”

And of course such a declaration simply articulates the well-known verse of St. Paul, your predecessor: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach a gospel to you besides that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema” (Gal. 1:8).

Your Excellency, it is impossible for us to overlook the glaring contradiction between ecumenical initiatives such as the appearance of the Episcopalian priest in your Diocese and the dogmatic condemnation of such actions by the Church from St. John to Pius XI. Furthermore, these condemnations, based on Tradition, assume a clear tone of infallible authority, whereas actions based on the pastoral Second Vatican Council do not. We cannot but conclude, as you must upon reflection, that the greater authority must override the lesser, and your grave responsibility as a Shepherd must clearly heed the “gospel already preached,” rather than “new doctrines” which cannot overturn the authority of Christ’s pronouncements through his Apostles and Vicars of the past.

Your Excellency, allow me to go so far as to remind you that by resisting these ecumenical directives on the above grounds, you will be in excellent company. You will have the company first of all of St. Paul himself, who lovingly resisted his Pope, the holy St. Peter, giving us all an example, as St. Thomas writes in his *Commentary on Galatians*. You will have the company of St. Athanasius, the holy Bishop who saved the Church from the heresy of Arianism—when, as St. Jerome wrote, “the whole world groaned to find itself Arian.” This Bishop and Saint suffered the spiritual martyrdom of an unjust excommunication and five exiles for resisting Pope Liberius, but was vindicated by the Church as the “Defender of the Faith” and has been raised to her altars. You will have the company of St. Godfrey of Amiens, St. Hugues of Grenoble and many other Bishops assembled at the synod of Vienne (1112) who resisted Pope Pascal II with these bold words: “If, as we absolutely do not believe, you choose another path and refuse to confirm the decisions that we have taken, may it not please God, we will then be separated from your obedience” (*Tract. De Papa*, Vol. II, 650). You will certainly have the company of an inspiring Bishop, St. John Fisher—the only Bishop to resist the Anglican usurpation of the Church of England—and a martyr as a consequence. You will have the company of St. Thomas More, also a martyr in resisting Anglicanism. St. Margaret Clitherow, martyr in Protestant England, will rejoice at your courage. We might also mention St. Eusebius, St. Theodore of Studium, and St. Catherine of Sienna as examples to inspire your Excellency with a wise and courageous course of action, so desperately needed by the Church and the faithful in your Diocese.

Your Excellency is known for his obedience and good Catholic example. You are certainly an inspiration to us. Yet you must know that obedience must be at the service of faith, and never the reverse. Praying ardently for the Holy Father, it must pain your Excellency to contemplate the somber words of St. Cajetan, “One must resist the Pope who openly destroys the Church.” But however inspired by good intention, are not public acts by prelates and Popes which have been defined by Pius XI as “abandoning the religion revealed by God” undeniably destructive of the Church? Let us also remember the words of Pope Felix III: “To not resist error is to approve it, to not defend the truth is to suffocate it....Whoever fails to oppose a

manifest prevarication, can be considered a secret accomplice.” These words were cited by Leo XIII in his letter to the Italian Bishops on August 12, 1892, and I hope you will excuse me for quoting them to you.

Be assured of our fervent prayers for your Excellency. We entrust this matter to you and await your action, which we pray will be guided by the Holy Spirit and intercession of Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, who has a special love for the Bishops of her Son’s Church. True ecumenism is a loving outreach which nevertheless does not give scandal, nor confuse the faithful, but makes clear that the unity willed by Christ will only be accomplished by the return of the Protestants and all schismatics to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, outside of which there is no salvation.

With filial devotion,

Craig L. Heimbichner
Convert, by the grace of God

...to which Bishop Weigand answered...



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January 22, 2001

Mr. Craig Heimbichner
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Dear Mr. Heimbichner:

This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter of January 17th, which was received on January 22nd. The pulpit exchange that you refer to is, indeed, an exceptional event, not done routinely. It is done in the context of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which the Holy See established many years ago, together with other Christian churches, to pray for the fulfillment of Christ’s prayer “that all might be one.” This will be the third or fourth time we have done this during my years in Sacramento and the results have been salutary.

Be assured of my prayers and best wishes.

Fraternally in the Lord,


WILLIAM K. WEIGAND
Bishop of Sacramento

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