

5 Απριλίου 2017

Cross Purposes on Empty Chapels & Symbols of Faith (Fr. John Parker)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)





The first time I visited the sacristy of the Wren Chapel at the College of William and Mary, where the chapel's brass cross now resides out of sight of the visitor, I waited there, dressed in black, sweaty palmed, being reminded to breathe, sequestered till the arrival of my bride at the west end of the chapel. On cue, I departed the colonial room and followed the priest, along with my three groomsmen, to the small but unmistakably English altar, which still faces *ad orientem*, one reminder of the age of the chapel.

For the second visit, a few years later, I was also dressed in black, though this time under my festal white vestments. I was the celebrant of someone else's wedding—my brother's. On this occasion, I was the breathing coach. I remember moving the chalice and paten from the sacristy to the altar before the service. I remember celebrating the wedding and giving thanks where Anglican and Episcopal priests have served since the late 1700s.

The sacristy of any church is the guarded location of its sacred vessels. It is no surprise that we had to take the Eucharistic vessels out of the safe and put them on the altar, but it has come as an outrage to some and a surprise to a great many that the altar cross, given in 1931 to the college by Bruton Parish—the oldest Episcopal parish in the United States—now has its home in the sacristy, except when the chapel is used for a specifically Christian event.

The Cross's Message

Late last year, the president of the college unilaterally ordered its removal from the altar, saying the cross “sends a message that the Chapel belongs more fully to some of us than to others. That there are, at the College, insiders and outsiders.”

Apparently, it is thought that the architecture of the building sends no such message, despite the fact that the chapel is a precise model of an English church, with its fixed altar, the altar rail complete with closing gate and kneelers, the pulpit, the chancel choir (with the pews facing one another), the choir loft, and the organ. It is hardly a generic chapel, such as one might find in an airport or a secular hospital.

It is not necessary to re-address what so many others have already capably investigated and reported: the balance of having a historic Christian chapel in a public university, the question as to whether or not a cross on an altar in a building is offensive to non-Christians, the self-appointed decision by the college president to remove the cross, and so forth.

To be honest, I am not all that disturbed by the removal of the cross. In fact, I would put it in the same category as public monuments listing the Ten Commandments, which have been under similar scrutiny in recent years. The reality of the matter is that we are not a Christian nation.

As I wondered to the founder of www.savethewrencross.org, what true difference does it make whether or not the cross adorns an empty chapel, when the following is true? Every single night, hundreds of students from the college stumble in a drunken stupor to their evening lodging, which often is not their own dorm room. Fornication is rampant. Since my day (1989–1993), the college has prided itself on its support for homosexuality.

From a Christian perspective, the history of the college and the chapel is, for all intents and purposes, immaterial today. St. John the Forerunner made it known that there is no sense in trying to claim, and indeed no possibility of claiming, any relation to salvation by citing the names of our ancestors. He cried out, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

And there is certainly no sense in guarding a historically Christian chapel when the fundamental activities just outside its frequently empty halls bear no resemblance to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

A Regular Scandal

It should not surprise Christians that the Cross is a scandal, at William and Mary or any other place. It will always be “a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles,” as St. Paul described Christ crucified.

By God’s grace, the only way fruit will be born at the college is by repentance. The Cross will be seen as the sign of Christ’s redemptive, self-sacrificial, and atoning embrace, the “weapon of peace” as it is called in the Orthodox tradition, only when self-professing Christians fully devote themselves to chastity, humility, patience, and love; when our chief foci are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

There is, in fact, a very easy way for the cross to be returned to the chapel: Schedule the traditional hours of the Church in Wren Chapel daily. The method will also return the Cross to the lives of those related to the College, offering a two-fold metanoia.

Let groups of local students, faculty, staff, and alumni organize themselves into congregations of prayer. Offer the ancient daily services along with the biblical hours of prayer: the evening service (vespers), the service after supper (compline), midnight, the morning service (matins), and 6:00 A.M., 9:00 A.M., 12:00 P.M., and 3:00 P.M. (the first, third, sixth, and ninth hours). This holy action would bring the cross out of the sacristy for a few hours every day and would change both the hearts and the minds of all who take part in such ministrations.

And it would show the college president, as well as the world, the true purpose of a Christian chapel. Apart from such an effort, we will waste our days trying to prove the legitimacy of the chapel on historical terms—an interesting question in our country’s oldest academic building, but of little use to our salvation in the present.

As a public university, William and Mary cannot require daily chapel services, as it did in its early years. Yet there is no public crime in the gathering of two or three to pray at regular intervals in Wren Chapel, making a historic verity into a present reality.

Touchstone Editor’s note: On March 7, after this article was written, a committee at William and Mary proposed a new policy, according to which the cross will be permanently displayed inside a glass case in the chapel, with a plaque commemorating the college’s Anglican roots and its historic connection to Bruton

Parish Church.

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This article was originally published by Touchstone (<http://www.touchstonemag.com/>) on June 2007 Volume 20, Issue 5 and is posted here with permission

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