

CATHEDRALS AND PARISHES

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Not long ago someone informed me that the newly appointed Canon Precentor of Washington National Cathedral, that is, the person in charge of liturgy, is a Methodist minister. I responded, somewhat rudely, especially rudely since I was talking to a Methodist, that, given the style of liturgy at Washington National Cathedral, it might as well be organized by a Methodist. This got me thinking about Washington National Cathedral and cathedrals in general, and what they do.

Washington National Cathedral is nobody's parish church. In fact it is located within the bounds of another parish, St. Alban's, which is right next door. The ministry of the Cathedral is diocesan and national in scope, and perhaps at times even international, but it does not occur on the parish level. It is the seat ("cathedra") of both the Bishop of Washington and the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. It has seen funerals of presidents and other important dignitaries. Other than that, it's a tourist attraction. Visitors to Washington want to attend a Sunday service there, whether they are Episcopalian or not, and the Cathedral obliges by reducing the service to the lowest common denominator of what any visitor is likely to understand. People used to ask me why I didn't go to church there, and I always said it was because I wanted to be part of an actual parish.

Washington National Cathedral, which is more correctly known as "The Cathedral Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in the City and Diocese of Washington" is one of very few real Anglican cathedrals in the United States. What do I mean by a "real cathedral"? I mean a church that was conceived and designed as a cathedral from the beginning. Saint John the Divine in New York City is one, Grace in San Francisco is another, and there are probably a few more. These cathedrals were never intended to have parish responsibilities, and they were never intended to have permanent congregations. The majority of Episcopal churches in the United States that we call "cathedral" are what would be called in England a "pro-cathedral", that is, a parish church that is elevated to the status to a cathedral while still retaining the responsibilities of a parish church. In England, a priest in charge of a "pro-cathedral" is called a "provost", while only a "real cathedral" can have a "dean". We do not make this distinction in the United States. In Louisville, where I was born and grew up, the oldest parish church, Christ Church, was designated a cathedral when Kentucky was split into two dioceses (the western half is the Diocese of Kentucky and the eastern half is the Diocese of Lexington). This came as a big surprise to the people of nearby Calvary Church. They expected to be the cathedral and even incorporated a bishop's crozier as part of the building.

In the Diocese of West Texas, our first Bishop, Robert W.B. Elliott, designated St. Mark's, San Antonio, as his cathedral, but after his death, his successor, James Steptoe Johnston, announced that the arrangement was only during the episcopate of Bishop Elliott, and he rescinded it. This diocese has been without a cathedral ever since. I have always considered this a misfortune, but most people don't seem to mind. If they did mind, we would have a cathedral by now, either by designating St. Mark's or some other parish church as the cathedral, or by building one. I don't think that's going to happen.

The reason I miss having a cathedral is that I have never liked having diocesan events, such as episcopal consecrations, in rented auditoriums. I find it unseemly. I don't know whether St. Luke's, St. Mark's, Christ Church, or the chapel of TMI would be able to hold a congregation for such an event, but I would much rather see it take place in a real church instead of a convention center. Maybe that's just

me.

It's unfortunate that people of this diocese don't get to see what goes on in a cathedral. I've been in a few, and they can be very uplifting and inspiring. They can also be very contentious and quarrelsome too, but we would hope that ours wouldn't be like that. After all, Texans are friendly.