

“HIGH CHURCH” “ANGLO-CATHOLIC” “RITUALIST”
“TRACTARIAN”
What do they mean?

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Lately we have been trying to come to terms with the uniqueness of St. Paul’s in the city of San Antonio and the Diocese of West Texas, especially as it relates to our primary mission to bring all people to Christ. What makes us different from, say, Christ Church or St. Mark’s? It has always been said that St. Paul’s is “high church” or “Anglo-Catholic.” Do those terms mean the same thing? If so, what is that? And if not, what is the difference?

Let’s start with “high church.” To many people, “high church” is anything they didn’t grow up with. My first parish had Morning Prayer as the main service three Sundays out of four. Having “Holy Communion” as the principal service every Sunday was “high church” but calling it “Mass” was way too high. That’s what the Roman Catholics did and God forbid we should copy them. In some places Holy Communion every Sunday was the norm, but they were still called “low church” unless they had incense and a Sanctus bell (“smells and bells”).

“High church” did not originally refer to ceremonial at all. It was a theological position. The person so identified held a “high” view of the Church as a divine institution, instituted by Christ himself, with the centrality of the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon. This was a view of the Church that had been lost for several centuries and was replaced by the view that the Church of England was simply the “religion department” of the British government. The attempt to restore this “high” status of the Church in the 19th century grew out of the Oxford Movement (we can talk about that sometime) and invariably led to the restoration of a number of ceremonial aspects, such as the wearing of Eucharistic vestments, reservation of the Sacrament, processional crosses, vested choirs, etc. The restoration of these features to the Church was termed “ritualist” and led to riots in some places. The “high” position of the Church was supported by a series of pamphlets called “Tracts for the Times” and its writers and their followers came to be called “tractarians.”

So what does “Anglo-Catholic” mean? This might properly be termed a “party” within the Anglican Communion. And just as the Democratic Party and the Republican Party have changed positions on many things over the years, so has the Anglo-Catholic party changed its views and the manner in which it supported those views.

In general, Anglo-Catholics (I really don’t like using the word “party”) support the “high” view of the Church. They (or rather, we) like to express our reverence for the sacraments by placing them at the center of our religious practice and adorning them with dignity and honor. We put worship first and relegate everything else to a lower priority. We also like to find and adapt liturgical traditions to our worship life. What liturgical traditions? Ashes on Ash Wednesday, palms on Palm Sunday, candles on Candlemas, for example.

But don't all Episcopal churches have these things? Yes, pretty much, since the 1979 Prayer Book, which was clearly an Anglo-Catholic victory. But you won't find them in the 1928 Prayer Book. This is what I mean by suggesting that party issues have changed over the years.

Other issues have changed as well. Anglo-Catholic parishes used to oppose the ordination of women on the grounds that it was not "catholic." They also opposed the ordination of openly identified gay priests, although their ranks were filled with closeted gays. Some even opposed the adoption of the 1979 Prayer Book. I could never figure this one out. Obviously Anglo-Catholics have shifted on these issues, thank God.

There has often been an attitude among Anglo-Catholics that we know the mind of God better than the "low church" or "Evangelicals." Some have looked down their noses at them and called them "Prots." Some Anglo-Catholic parishes have set themselves against the bishop and the diocese and refused to cooperate in diocesan matters. I like to think that this posture has vanished from the Church, but every now and then I hear rumors. Please let's not ever go there again.

Now we come to a special issue related to the use of the term "Anglo-Catholic." Here in South Texas the word "Anglo" refers to a person who is not of African or Hispanic heritage. By calling a church "Anglo-Catholic" it makes it sound like it's a "white people's church." (Although I knew a priest from Honduras who told me, "Yo soy anglo-católico.") This is exactly the impression we do NOT want to give. We never want to exclude anyone. What do we do about this pesky term "Anglo?" We're still working this out. I personally like the solution that the Church in Mexico came up with. They describe their church as "Católica pero no romana; evangélica pero no protestante." (Catholic but not Roman; Evangelical but not Protestant). I like this phrase so much that I wish we had it engraved in Spanish and English on the base of our yard sign.

This article does not offer any conclusions on what we at St. Paul's should be doing about our identity. That's because it's not the job of somebody who just writes articles to decide something like that. It's for us to work out together in the time before us and we grow and spread the message of Jesus Christ to our community and the city around us.