

## A Guest Article

from Very Revd Canon Charles Taylor, who is currently assisting the Cathedral Clergy team until a new Dean is appointed, taken from his talk to the Community Forum at their AGM in October.

Last month I completed 41 years in Holy Orders, 28 of which have been spent ministering in cathedral and capitular foundations. So I thought I might just share with you a few thoughts on what a cathedral might be for and hence by implication what a cathedral community and its forum should be about.

Well, first and foremost, as you well know, a cathedral is a cathedral, not by virtue of its size, grandeur or architectural heritage, but because



it houses the Bishop's *cathedra*. *cathedra* being Latin for a teacher's chair or seat of authority, such as a throne. That is how a cathedral is

defined by statute, as the seat of the Bishop and a centre of worship and mission. It is a visible sign and symbol of the unity of all the parishes which make up a diocese through their communion and fellowship with their Bishop; and the cathedral, as his seat, is a focus for his mission and ministry in the whole diocese.

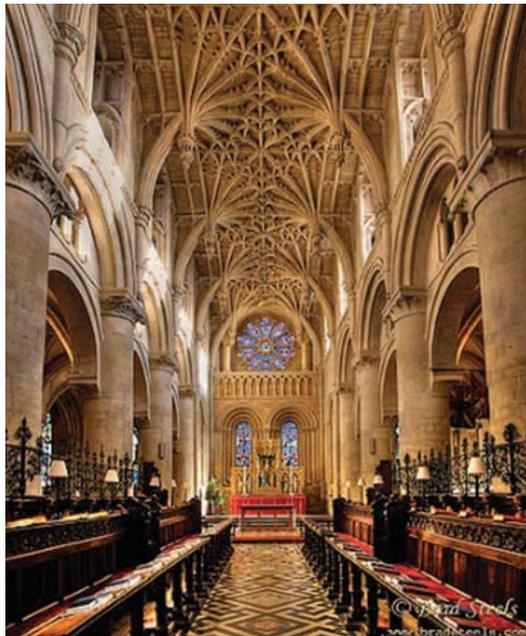
And the governing body of a cathedral, the Dean and the Chapter, constitutes the Bishop's *familia* or household. This is perhaps most obviously expressed when the Bishop presides in the Cathedral, surrounded by his *familia*, at such Episcopal services as baptism and confirmation, Ordination, and other diocesan occasions. When I went to Peterborough as Dean, I was somewhat horrified to discover that, on the annual ordination Sunday, the ordination mass at 11.00am was preceded at 9.30am by something called "The Cathedral Eucharist" presumably with the intention of catering for regular worshippers who wanted "their own" service. Yet surely, one can have no better example of a cathedral Eucharist than the Bishop functioning *ex cathedra*, ordaining clergy and presiding at the Eucharist in his own cathedral. So we soon changed that and encouraged those who saw the Cathedral as "their" church to support its role as *cathedra* by their presence as well as their prayers.

But the role of cathedral as *cathedra* is also expressed in a great variety of ways. It is expressed not least by the inclusion of the Dean on the Bishop's Staff. Indeed, according to Canon Law, the governance of a Church of England diocese is vested in the Archbishops, the Diocesan Bishop, the Dean and the Archdeacons, part of the system of checks and balances introduced at the Reformation; and I would estimate that as a Dean I spent at least a third of my time, possibly more, directly involved in that sort of work - Bishop's Staff meetings, Bishop's Council, DBF, conducting Ministry Reviews - appraisals for the clergy and, not least, as a semi-independent sounding board, critical friend and pastor for the Bishop himself.

More especially, a cathedral exercises its support of the Bishop's ministry by the offering of prayer for him or her and the diocese at the regular services, at least two services every weekday and four on Sundays. And there are lots of other ways in which such support is or could be given to the Bishop and his diocese, such as the hosting of parish pilgrimages, deploying the skills of the cathedral clergy, musicians and others to assist with the work of teaching and training clergy and laity in the diocese, and so on.

Secondly, a cathedral is a *custodian of the tradition*. This follows on

naturally from cathedral as *cathedra*, the seat of the Bishop; because, among other things, the Bishop is called to be a teacher and guardian of the faith. But by *tradition*, I don't mean a starchy refusal to change with the times, doing things as we always have done simply because we have always done it that way. You will be familiar with "the last seven words" of Christ dying on the cross. Well, the last seven words of a dying church may well turn out to be "We have always done it that way." No. By the *tradition* I mean the Christian story, a story which, while continuous and constant with the past, is still unfolding; a story which is still being retold and reshaped by the actual experience of the Church community of God alive and at work in the present.



Again this is rooted in the daily prayers and worship of the Church, and in the celebration of the Christian seasons such as Christmas and Easter. But we also tell that story through the building itself, a sermon in stone, and through the conservation, presentation and interpretation of the treasures entrusted to us in bricks and mortar, glass and silver, art, music and theology; through which we not only engage with visitors and tourists, but also with the world of education, working in partnership with schools, colleges, universities and adult education.

So the cathedral as *cathedra*, the seat of the Bishop; and the cathedral as *custodian of the tradition*, the teller of the Christian story. Then, thirdly, cathedral as icon - an icon principally in its city and the region embraced by the diocese, but also at national and sometimes international level. Following a fire inside Peterborough Cathedral in 2001, one of the first donations came from the Muslim community who said they regarded it as "their" Cathedral. Or, as another example, the annual High School Graduation Ceremony for the US airbase at Alconbury. One year they weren't going to have it in the Cathedral, the US defence budget had other priorities at the time, but the students themselves raised the finance so they could graduate from "their" Cathedral.

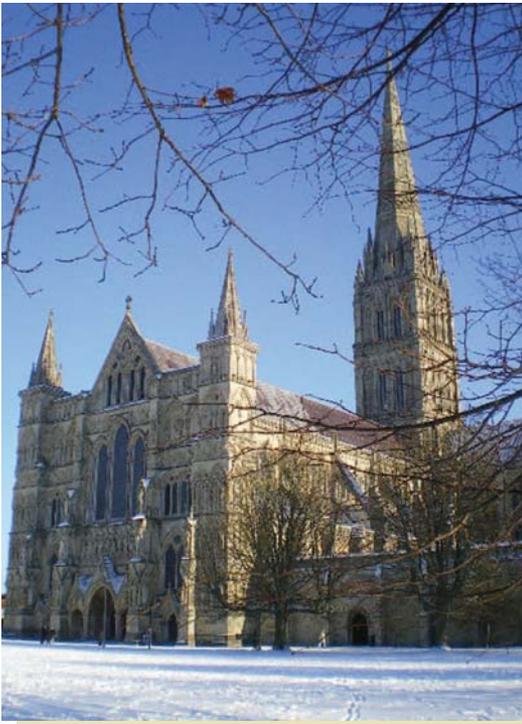
I think it was Christopher Lewis, Dean of Christchurch, Oxford, who observed that, quite often, cathedrals are more loved and valued by the world than by the Church! Other manifestations of the *icon* include, of course, big memorial services, county, civic and other community occasions; partnership with the local authority, for example, in plans for regeneration. Or again, just before Christmas one year, we were visited by BBC One's breakfast show in a week when they were doing features on "people who bring us Christmas." One morning the programme focussed on the postman; the next day was the Brussel Sprout farmer; then, after the sprouts came the wind in the form of the Dean!

Cathedral as *cathedra*; cathedral as *custodian of the tradition*; cathedral as *icon*; and, finally, cathedral as *community*. For it goes without saying that all of the above cannot be sustained, let alone developed, without the active support of a community committed to worship and prayer, mission and ministry, and not least to the exercise of financial generosity.

Such a community needs to be carefully nurtured, taught, trained and pastored. But who is the cathedral community? Staff? Volunteers? Clergy? The Cathedral School? The congregation? And which congregation, for it is the case that

cathedrals tend to have a multiplicity of different congregations, Sundays, weekdays, mornings, evenings, special services. And what about those who slip in to sit quietly and anonymously to reflect and pray? Cathedrals, partly because they tend to be open all day and every day, but also because of the eclectic nature of their congregations and the lack of pressure to stand up, say who you are and immediately join a church committee, cathedrals tend to be places which attract the troubled, the disturbed and the broken, and others who are just in need of some sacred space, physical and spiritual space.

We tried to remind ourselves that part of our Benedictine heritage at Peterborough was the ministry of hospitality. But what do we mean by that? Is it simply a matter of providing a welcome for visitors and somewhere to buy a cup of tea and a bun; or is it, should it be much more than that - an open door, a welcome, and spiritual and mental as well as physical refreshment, for those who need somewhere just to drop in off the streets? I seem to recall that somewhere in the Rule of Benedict it was stated that the monastic guestmaster should greet anyone who came off the streets by prostrating himself before the visitor. If our guides and welcomers tried that at the west end, they'd spend the whole day flat on their faces. But the point is that each and every person who enters the



once more: “What cathedrals provide is the opportunity for people to explore and perhaps to cross the awkward boundary between the secular and the sacred .... Cathedrals are (or should be) places for the best kind of Christian risk. The ecumenical experiment, the interfaith event, the exploration of the boundaries of religious art or music: all these have their place within its generous walls.” And, as a consequence, says Lewis, “No cathedral filing system is complete without a good collection of letters of comment and complaint as well as congratulation after events which test the religious or artistic perimeters...A domesticated cathedral is a sorry thing.”

Cathedral, known or unknown, of high or low estate, should be received as though he or she were Christ himself.

Well, I’ve gone on long enough; but I hope I’ve managed to convey just a little of the life and purpose of a cathedral today; enough at any rate to suggest that a cathedral is not quite the same thing as a glorified parish church, but has a distinct and, I trust, complementary role; one that is primarily neither congregational nor parochial, but perching, sometimes precariously, on the edge between the Church and the world. I’ve quoted Christopher Lewis, the former Dean of Oxford already. Permit me to do so just

A final word from my favourite characters from the Black Country of the West Midlands - Aynuk and Ayli. I don’t know whether any of you have come across the stories of Aynuk & Ayli, caricature Black Country characters, daft as brushes, notoriously work-shy. Indeed the only job Ayli ever held down was wringing out the chamois leather for a one-armed window-cleaner. Anyway, one Palm Sunday morning, Aynuk met Ayli leading a donkey up the path of Birmingham Cathedral to take part in the Palm Sunday procession. Aynuk said to Ayli, “What am yow doin?” Ayli explained, “Oi got this donkey for the Dean.” “Cor”, said Aynuk, “that were a good swap!”