

Diocese of Maryland Convention Sermon:
“All Along, Not All Alone”

[From Bishop Thomas Claggett’s address to the 1794 Diocesan Convention]

“We entreat, we adjure you, brethren, to show a greater zeal for your excellent Church, and not to refuse the care and charge of her.” [PAUSE]

Let’s come back to that. But first...

It feels very good to be with you here in Maryland. Truly, for me, this is coming home...for although a native of Texas, I spent most of my childhood and teenage years in Maryland, and my closest friends with whom I went to school still reside here, in West Friendship and Columbia. If you tell me which parish you are from, however, I may not immediately know it, for I am not a “cradle Episcopalian,” but rather grew up with a Roman Catholic dad and a Southern Baptist mom. We went to Mass and to parochial school, for the sake of unity, my mother said. Of course, she also said, “Don’t you believe everything the Pope tells you.” I nodded dutifully at the admonition, though I confess that I did not expect to hear the Pontiff’s voice myself.

I do remember, however, the first time I heard the voice of God...well, almost. I was a young acolyte serving at the 6:45 a.m. daily Eucharist, a service that only the most disciplined and devout would attend regularly...meaning that it usually had six to eight folks, all seated in various spots throughout the two-hundred-and-fifty seat sanctuary. Normally, they would hear the pastor, Fr. Lou, offer a few words of encouragement before going into the Communion, but on this one particular day, Fr. Lou had invited a visiting theologian to preach. And he preached, and preached, and

preached, and preached. About thirty-two minutes into his five point sermon on sin and repentance, I suddenly heard it. Coming from above. The voice of God. And it was...snoring. Yes, I heard a voice from the heavens, snoring, and I was astonished. I looked around at the tiny congregation and saw them looking up—the miracle was not for me alone! Then, suddenly it dawned on me. Perhaps this was not as miraculous as I thought. For earlier that week, the church's new remote microphones had finally arrived, and Fr. Lou was wearing one, and sure enough, he had not turned it off. He was...deep in meditation. Okay, he was snoring. Loud. In fact, he was beginning to snore and snort, and his body was starting to lean to the left, like a human Tower of Pisa. It was becoming embarrassing. Everyone was noticing now, at least almost everyone. Our scholarly preacher was just wrapping up point three of his exposition and ready to move on to point four. Finally, knowing what I had to do, I mustered all the courage my youthful body had, asked the Lord's forgiveness, and jabbed Fr. Lou in the ribs, abruptly waking him. Startled, he stood and boldly proclaimed, "We believe in one God!"

Never have I witnessed a more exuberant recital of the Creed as all those present joined right in: "We believe in one God."

Whether he knew it or not, it was Fr. Lou, and not the learned theologian, who gave the sermon that has stayed with me. For when he was not even fully alert, the words he said were the words he had remembered, the words that had become a part of him: We believe in one God...and it is not us! It is so easy to get caught up in the notion that everything is up to me, up to you. To be weighed down with the onerous burdens of worry, fear, guilt, resentment. To feel alone and overwhelmed. "Be still," the Psalm says, "and know that I am God." Not you...I.

The liberator and lawgiver, Moses, found himself burdened by concerns of the people, bombarded by their ongoing complaints. “Did I conceive all this people?” he called out to God. “Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom.’” There, in the midst of those interminable wanderings, there in that wilderness of unending journeying, Moses miserably admitted, “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.” *Too heavy...too heavy*. “The world is too much with us,” a great poet declared, but it is not “the world” that is ultimately the problem, only our perceived need to carry it...alone. God’s response to Moses’ protest is direct, humbling, and altogether practical: “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people *along with you* so that you will not bear it all by yourself” (Num 11:16-17). Along with you, not you alone.

Similarly, Luke the Evangelist, just one chapter after his report of the commissioning of the Twelve, announces that “the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.” Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers to include this tale of another “numbered” group beyond the Twelve, a group that at least seems to echo the story of Moses and the seventy elders appointed to help him. “The harvest is plentiful,” the Lukan Jesus declares, “but the workers are few.” And so the Seventy are appointed, not supplanting the apostolic ministry of the Twelve, but complementing it, enhancing it, expanding it. Just as the Seven will do in Luke’s sequel, Acts.

These additional players appear on the Evangelist's stage as a living witness to the faithfulness of God, as a reminder that none are to bear the burden alone, not even apostles. Indeed, even these "seventy others" are sent out "in pairs," as further testimony of the shared ministry which defines the Church then and ever since. After all, as Fr. Lou unwittingly reminded me, we are a people of common prayer and, I would add, common mission.

"We entreat, we adjure you, brethren, to show a greater zeal for your excellent Church, and not to refuse the care and charge of her." Two years later, in his address to the 1796 Diocesan Convention, Bishop Claggett further said: "Permit me to recommend to you an *unremitted exertion of your Powers in the discharge of the important duties of our respective offices.*" Not all are apostles, not all teachers, not all evangelists or preachers, Paul says. And not all are bishops! Like Bishop Claggett, your new Diocesan might well implore all of you to show "a greater zeal for your excellent Church...to offer an unremitted exertion of your powers." And like Bishop Claggett, your Diocesan might well proclaim, "I assure you of my determined Resolution to co-operate with you to the utmost of my power, in promoting the Interest of our Church." Our Savior did indeed appoint certain persons to the ministry of apostle...but he also appointed seventy others to complement that ministry, to enhance it, to expand it.

You are the Seventy, whether you number one-hundred-and-fifty, or one thousand, or many thousands. You all have, as that first Bishop of Maryland so aptly put it, "important duties of your respective offices." We believe in one God, we follow one God, we serve one God...and we do so together. For years ago, when I was serving as a lay leader in a parish, I overheard the

associate rector unburdening himself to the minister of music, sharing the unmanageable struggles that he was facing at that time. “I’m not even sure if I believe right now,” he uttered in dismal resignation. Again I heard a response that I would keep with me forever, as the music minister reached out a hand, placed it on the priest’s shoulder, and calmly said, “That’s okay, for now, we’ll believe for you.”

We believe in one God, and it is not us. We believe in one God, even when some among us including our leaders, find ourselves overwhelmed and under siege. We believe in one God, and that God in whom we believe, in whom we dare to put our trust, calls us to stand together in our common worship and mission, in the discharge of the important duties of our respective offices, and not just one or two or twelve of us, but seventy of us...indeed seventy times seventy of us. To God be the glory. Amen.