

Ending church flummery: titles, mitres and Latin

1.) Titles

The Agenda¹ of the April 2021 General Synod lists the Private Members Motions that have been requested, including:

ABOLITION OF DEFERENTIAL TITLES

James Dudley-Smith (Bath & Wells) to move:

‘That this Synod, noting Bishop Peter Hancock’s words quoted by the IICSA Anglican Church Investigation Report October 2020, that ‘issues of clericalism and deference have allowed abuse to be covered up and the voices of the vulnerable to be silenced’ (B.6.2.4.1) ask that steps be taken to abolish, and discourage the use of, deferential titles such as Reverend, Right Reverend, Very Reverend, Most Reverend, Venerable, and that clergy be instead referred to and addressed using the names of the roles they hold, e.g. Vicar, Rector, Bishop, Dean, Archbishop, Archdeacon.’

The Revd James Dudley-Smith is I believe the son of the Rt Revd Timothy Dudley-Smith. His motion would therefore ditch the deferential titles for himself, his father and all other clergy.

The motion is unlikely to get to a vote because Private Members Motions only reach the debate stage when they have enough signatures from Synod members. This motion was only submitted in February, so there probably won’t be time for it to gather enough support prior to the Synod elections in the autumn.

Nevertheless, I have sympathy with point of the motion. The Bible includes references to roles such as bishop, presbyter, deacon, apostle, prophet etc, but they aren’t accompanied by bowing and scraping. The two main leaders of the early church, Saints Peter and Paul were only too aware of their own sinfulness. Peter had denied Jesus, and Paul had persecuted Christians; both were raised up by Jesus’ mercy rather than on the basis of their merits. Saint Paul wrote: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.”²

I happily use the title “Saint” to refer to Paul, because the title saint is a recognition by the church of a witness that is an example to us - saint does not mean sinless.

I would not go as far as James proposes. I think that the basic term “Reverend” should be kept. Firstly, there is nothing wrong with a simple term of respect. Secondly, on practical grounds, there are many roles that someone ordained in the Church of England may hold: vicar, rector, curate, deacon, incumbent, area dean, rural dean, clerk in holy orders etc. How do you know when you are writing their address on an envelope whether they are legally a vicar or rector? Much simpler to write the catch-all, “The Revd Jane/John Smith”.

I would be OK getting rid of “Right Reverend” as you could simply address an envelope “Bishop Jane/John Smith”. I would definitely dispense with “Most Reverend”, “Very Reverend” and “Venerable” – too much flummery.

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/news-releases/general-synod-papers-published>

² 1 Timothy chapter 1, verse 15, New Revised Standard Version.

2.) Mitres

I remember years ago, Bishop Colin Buchannan asking as a General Synod Question, when will bishops follow the recommendation of a previous Lambeth Conference to stop wearing mitres? Bishop Colin was probably referring to the 1968 Lambeth Conference. That Conference Report stated:

“Christ requires those who exercise leadership in the Church to be servants of all. Our way of exercising the office of bishop has often obscured this truth.”³

The Conference resolved:

“41. The Conference recommends that the bishops, as leaders and representatives of a servant Church, should radically examine the honours paid to them in the course of divine worship, in titles and customary address, in style of living, while having the necessary facilities for the efficient carrying on of their work.”⁴

I’m all for clergy wearing liturgical clothes (vestments) for a service of holy communion, because God is holy, and when you are dealing with the sacraments of Jesus’ death, wearing holy/separate clothes that symbolise what you are doing is important. Just as a bride will wear a wedding dress – special clothes show a special occasion. But mitres are not necessary for bishops, they just look silly. Fifty-three years since the Lambeth Conference resolution we are still waiting for progress in that area.

3.) Latin

The recent Church of England book, “Living in Love & Faith” has been carefully designed to be accessible. However, its Foreword is signed “+ Justin Cantuar + Stephen Ebor”⁵.

“Justin” stands for Justin Welby, “Cantuar” stands for Cantuariensis, Latin for Canterbury. Similarly, “Ebor” is not Stephen Cottrell’s surname, it is Latin for Eboracum, meaning York.

I have many traditional beliefs, but I don’t support empty tradition that simply confuses. It’s time the Archbishops signed themselves, “Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury and Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York” and left the Latin alone.

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³ Page 108 “The Lambeth Conference 1968: Resolutions and Reports”, SPCK and Seabury Press 1968.

⁴ Page 40.

⁵ Page X “Living in Love & Faith: Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.” Church House Publishing, 2020.