

**“The Urgency of the Church”**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**January 12, 2014**  
**By: Roy G. Pollina+**

I get some very curious phone calls about baptism from time to time. A young parent with a new baby will call the Parish House and ask questions about baptism. One call that I had recently from a parent is, “Do we have to join the church to get the baby baptized?”

There are two basic suppositions behind a question like, “Do we have to join the church to get the baby baptized?” One is that the baby needs to be baptized for salvation. The second is that the church is superfluous to that salvation.

I would like to think that such thinking is peculiar to the unchurched; they might be expected not to know any better. But, such talk is all too common among the churched. I once overheard a conversation between two church members; one church member said to the other, “You know church work should be concerned with God’s work,” the assumption being that those two are different. There is a growing chasm separating our understanding about our need for salvation and our understanding about our need to belong to the church. I have long seen evidence of this chasm but I have been unable to speak about it until I read an article written by The Rev. Dr. Leander S. Harding.

In his article, Fr. Harding compared spirituality in The Episcopal Church and spirituality in 12-step groups. What he found was a useful metaphor for looking at issues of salvation and church membership. I would like to share some of those insights with you right now. Fr. Leander tells us that 12-step groups are founded on desperation. Membership in groups such as AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, is

made of people who have unmanageable problems that they cannot solve by themselves. The first step in the 12-step program is to admit the need for help, and then to believe a power greater than yourself can restore health, to turn your life over to God as you understand God. 12-step programs are programs of urgency; people join out of sense of desperation. People in the program believe that their health, physical & mental, depend on faithful participation in the group, participation in the program, participation at the meetings. Members of 12-step groups know that participation is life and death for themselves and for others. They expect to be helped by each meeting and they feel that attendance alone is beneficial. Among members in 12-step groups there are few that complain about the variability or the quality of meetings. They know life would be exceedingly more difficult without meetings. Now, compare that sense of membership in groups like AA to membership in today’s church. Instead of the question, “How does church make an impossible life possible?” The question many church members ask is: “How does church make an already good life better?” The church is not a lifeboat but a pleasure boat. Church membership is seen not as a necessity but as an option. Church members become consumers of church products and to be a consumer is to threaten to take one’s trade elsewhere or to not purchase at all.

The early church was more akin to 12-step; there was an urgency about membership. The early church said quite simply and without apology, “There is no salvation outside of the church”. Today, 12-step groups say quite simply and politely: “You may find a solution

to your problem elsewhere through some other method than following this program, but I never have, nor have I known it to happen.” Like the early church, 12-step groups have a solution to an urgent problem, a solution founded in community and in a way of living. As a general observation, Fr. Harding suggests that the modern church lacks conviction that it has a unique and necessary role in salvation, that God’s salvation is uniquely available in the life of the church: in its preaching, its sacraments, its fellowship and its service. Many members of the church believe that salvation can be achieved or experienced quite apart from the church, its ministry, or its sacraments.

Surprisingly this view of the church is held by two groups within the church who hold little else in common and might be seen as at opposite ends of the church spectrum. One group Fr. Harding calls the liberationist; the other he calls the neo-evangelicals. The first group, the liberationists, is strongly influenced by the struggles of the culture, the struggles of women, and the struggles of minorities. They are informed by ideas such as liberation theology. The liberationists see sin primarily as social/political oppression. They see salvation primarily as a change in social/political order for relief of the poor and oppressed. For a liberationist, the church is one of many organizations seeking a better world. If the church is not committed to the struggle, then the church can be ignored.

At the other end of the spectrum, for the neo-evangelist, the focus is on personal conversion and the eternal consequence of heaven or hell. Salvation for the neo-evangelist is primarily a matter of a verdict, guilty or innocent, pronounced once and for all before the divine judge. To the neo-evangelist the church, its ministry, and its sacraments can help

salvation, but have no intrinsic value. That is why sacraments tend to be neglected in historically evangelical churches.

In our church, The Episcopal Church, many of our members hold to one of two popular theological views that see the church as something extra. In the Episcopal Church, the neo-evangelicals will say, “I am a Christian who happens to be a member of this church,” and the liberationists say, “My membership in the church supports me in my struggle for peace and justice.” Unlike 12-step groups, membership in the church has lost a sense of urgency – “Do we have to join the church to get our baby baptized?”

The best answer to that question comes from the long history of the church which believed that the sacraments, Baptism and Holy Eucharist, are part of the life of the church. The sacraments are real means of participating in the life and love of God. Even more, sacraments are a necessary participation without which we neither survive nor thrive. The church must lay claim to salvation. We must say to our friends and others, those who do not see the connection between salvation and the church, we must say to them: “Well you may be able to follow Jesus without the support of a loving community and the strength and support of the sacraments, but I cannot, nor do I know of anyone else who has.”

The church, its ministry and its sacraments are necessary for our salvation. It’s important that you know that. Amen.