

**At the Institution of the Rev. Laura Howell**  
**Trinity, Bethlehem**  
**Eve of Thomas Beckett, Dec. 28, 2007**  
**Paul V. Marshall, Bishop of Bethlehem**

On the fourth day of Christmas we get...a new rector. The ladies dancing and the lords-a-leaping will have to be pretty good this year to upstage such a gift, although I hear they gave it a good try last Saturday night.

In the most positive and respectful way possible I say that receiving this gift is not like getting a shiny, new present, the squawking of four birds, but is more like being given a valued family treasure. Not an antique, mind you, but a treasure. By that I mean to say that Mother Laura is someone whom I had the joy of receiving into this church, and someone with whom the people of Trinity and the clergy of the diocese have had the pleasure of working for a long enough time to know her value. There is no nervous stranger from Poughkeepsie waiting to be introduced tonight.

Old Acquaintance that she is, we are still several days away from singing Auld Lang Syne, so Mother Laura has injected a healthy tension into this liturgy by asking us to celebrate this new aspect of our relationship on the eve of Thomas Beckett's day, remembering a martyrdom that was messy and unnecessary. His death came one night in the bleak midwinter because he stood for the integrity of the Church and the honor of God against an adolescent tyrant whom he had befriended.

You have had a major article in your parish newsletter about Thomas' career, so I will not retell his story to you in detail. It has been said on the internet that St. Thomas Beckett was the last archbishop worth killing. That's a silly statement and I won't comment on it, but it makes a point: a thousand years later our Thomas stands out in anybody's list of bishop who accepted grave retribution for his principles.

As long as we're gossiping, I suspect that you know that it is sometimes said that when a new bishop is being ordained, what is going on in that prolonged huddle of bishops around the newbie is that the spine is being removed. It would be grossly unfair of me to tell whether that rumor is true or not: I'm never in favor of removing mystery from ritual. But I will say, that whether your study is longitudinal or latitudinal, compared with his colleagues, Thomas stands out as being possessed of large quantities of spine.

He stands out as a bishop who did not equivocate in commitments, whether we consider his care of the poor, the defense of his clergy, or what in the feudal language of his day was called "the honor of God."

Thomas could stand upright, and people did not have to guess what he thought or where his loyalties lay. You knew where you stood with Thomas, and you had to deal with him one way or another.

Like every other saint, Thomas requires that we come to terms with the totality of his character. He could be crude of manner, could be quite gruff, and is remembered in one English town for permanently banishing nightingales because their song disturbed his prayers.

But in my coming to terms with Thomas, in addition to discarding four previous versions of this manuscript (an all-time record), I had to accept what lay beneath his tactless exterior. That is this: nobody knew his faults better than Thomas did. He wore a hair shirt under his pontifical finery in order always to enact penance for his many failings and weaknesses. He gave up being the most powerful man in the country by resigning, against the king's desire, the office of chancellor when he became archbishop. He knew that he could have but one supreme loyalty.

Although the news of his day paid attention to his bold strokes for the security of the church, nobody much noticed that he slipped out at night to tend the sick in the leprosaria he started to give new hope to those most marginalized in England's green and pleasant land. In a sense, the first "Lambeth Conferences" were Beckett's community meals where he daily fed and gave alms to the poor.

Now we learn something. We certainly don't get it when Beckett protected a murderous priest (whose wrists the church courts had gently slapped) from being tried by the king's justice. Further, much of what passed between him and Henry II appears to twenty-first-century eyes a power game with bishops and king wrestling over laws, lands, and incomes.

But our point of view may change when we remember what happened a few centuries later when Henry VIII finally did seize the property of the church – England was suddenly flooded with hundreds of thousands of sick, lame, insane, and generally suppurating wretches for whom the church had been caring in those monasteries and almshouses. There is, then, more going on in the story of Beckett and Henry than meets the eye.

It is much too complicated for us to describe in detail, but when Beckett was opposing Henry II, he was doing the best he could to preserve the ability of the church to do its ministry unimpeded by a governmental system that sucked all wealth to the top and used it for things like war and enriching the already-rich instead of caring for the people at the bottom – but remember, this was a very long time ago.

Odd as his politics may sound to us, Beckett was *not* regarded as a reactionary nut job in his own day; in fact, his death made him an instant martyr all across Europe. His person and the positions he took touched something deep in the souls of common people. His tomb rapidly became the pilgrimage site of which Chaucer has made everyone who reads English aware.

In Beckett's time of exile in France, he learned not to seek martyrdom or sainthood, but to accept that death was the price of his position and to receive it simply as that.

T. S. Eliot, among other writers, has imagined what his struggle was like when it became clear that Henry and Beckett were on a collision course that no one could alter. Again, Beckett's spiritual achievement was that he accepted his death as the price of his position and nothing more. It was for others to determine whether his dying was martyrdom or sainthood. He would simply do his duty. In this I am reminded of Martin Luther King's last speech, given very shortly before he died, where he commented on death threats made against him:

*Like anybody, I would like to live...but I'm not concerned about that now...I just want to do God's will, and he's allowed me to go up to the mountain...So I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

So, all in all, Mother Laura's choice of a martyr-bishop-humanitarian Beckett as patron of her ministry as rector of Trinity puts you and me on notice. Her choice also puts her in a kind of jeopardy.

First, the notice to us. Most easily observed is that she is going to expect me to behave like a bishop, and will continue her Foole-ish taunts to keep me brave, clean, and reverent. *[Note to the Reader who wasn't there: some years ago, at her own request, Mother Laura was appointed Foole to the Bishop, a symbol coming more from St. Paul and Russian spirituality than from the circus.]*

But let's go deeper. Quite unlike Beckett, Mother Laura is not a gruff person, and would certainly not curse the nightingales – or even crows – for interrupting her prayers with their songs. If my fellow Scots were imaginatively able to form the concept of a Miss Congeniality award for their kind, she would surely get it. But by invoking Thomas on this occasion she is letting us know that there are limits to her genuine bonhomie, the limits that are imposed by our relationship to God and by the respect for the integrity of our fellow creatures that God requires. We trifle with those limits at our soul's peril, and she will let us know it.

This particular threshold for boom-lowering comes from her commitment to Benedictine style of leadership which I can admire without necessarily embracing – how's that for spine? Benedictine leaders seldom require obedience, and ideally do so only when somebody's soul is at stake. They work at communal discernment, but they are not pushovers. They do not fall in step with whoever has spoken loudest or most recently: they listen for the corporate mind. Mother Laura's limits are the honor of God and the welfare of God's favorites, the poor—should we fail to take either of these seriously in our communal discernment, she will let us know.

So we stand warned.

But I must in turn warn Mother Laura, although “warn” is perhaps too dramatic a word for what I am thinking, which may be more along the lines of encouragement and

reinforcement. And I, who live a life where the worst things that can be done to me is somebody writing something nasty, do not presume to offer any reminder to a rector as deeply in the trenches as is she that having principles may involve sacrifice. She already knows the depth and breadth of that truth.

I think rather of the last temptation T. S. Eliot imagined in his speculative play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. The final temptation Beckett faced in Eliot's telling of it, was to do the "right thing for the wrong reason," to maintain his principles in order to achieve the status of saint and martyr. Long ago the Church had forbidden the seeking of martyrdom as a quick ticket to heaven or as analgesic to the many vicissitudes of Christian vocation.

That temptation to do the right thing for the wrong reason implies another peril. From our perspective, given how we read history and how we think of the relationship of the Christian community to the now-secular order: it is possible to do *the wrong thing for the right reason*. Just taking a strong stand may do little good. Even the pope thought Beckett was standing on principle in too unbending a way to get a good result. It is arguable from this point of view that Beckett's commitment to principle gave him a lack of realism about the art of the possible, bringing himself and King Henry to a place where no one could maneuver.

In a day when church leadership seems marked by murky streams of indecision, these are hard words to say, and perhaps confusing to hear. I mean only to suggest that we have to know what we want to accomplish and move in the most effective way to accomplish it, wise as serpents and harmless as nightingales.

For example:

- (1) Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is going to have to adjust when the gaming industry comes next year. The time for feelings about that is over. The stresses on social ministry will be significant. We must find ways to raise our voices and take action that are most likely to get the result we need for those who will come to our doors.
- (2) We have needed to adjust for a decade to the growing chasm between the rich and poor in the Lehigh Valley.
- (3) We have needed to adjust for thirty years to the crises in health care and public transportation.
- (4) And we always have our permanent challenge of helping people see that they are making spiritual choices all of the time, whether they know it or not.

All of which is to say that Christian witness in arenas where we are considered irrelevant or reactionary is going to have to be courageous and very, very, clever. I am certain that merely being in people's faces will not get results.

In saying any of this, I do not suggest that Mother Laura is not subtle, or that she is not very, very clever. I bring up this aspect of Beckett's complexity to underscore our call to do the right thing for the right reasons so that Mother Laura will feel encouraged and supported by all of us in facing challenges in a way that may at first seem foolish, and later turn out to be the wisdom of God.

Well, it's almost time to stop before they come in with the five golden rings for tomorrow's present. St. Thomas was declared a saint in record time because people saw in him a burning desire to advance the church's work and uphold God's sovereignty. I can wish no more notoriety for your ministry, my sister. Should our age impose a Beckett-like cost for your commitment I pray that with your colleagues I will be with you when you pay it.