

Bishop Gilbert: A Brief Interlude



We live in strange and perilous times.

—CHARLES K. GILBERT

It is worth noting that at Bishop Manning's last diocesan convention a knowledgeable speaker referred to the atom bomb as capable of mass destruction. The speaker warned the delegates that "the trend toward such catastrophe is unmistakable."¹ The possibility of worldwide horror was only one of many modern developments the Manning years had witnessed, and at first it appeared to be almost an avoidance of a dangerous future that led the Episcopal Church in New York readily to elect its longtime suffragan to be bishop of the diocese. When Manning resigned, two New York City rectors were put forward as possible successors; and, claiming that the rural churches had been neglected, the rector of Millbrook moved into position as a dark horse in what might have been a prolonged election. But then Charles Gilbert, suffragan since 1930, quietly said yes, of course he would like to be Bishop of New York. It was a possibility not hitherto seriously considered, for Charles Gilbert was close to the age of mandatory retirement. But his expectations were not to be denied. He was elected on the first ballot in a special convention held less than a month after Manning retired. The other candidate was Claude W. Sprouse of Kansas City. The convention delegates were satisfied that Bishop Gilbert would, for a few years, prolong the Manning regime while new long-term leadership might emerge. This is exactly what happened. Within a year names such as Donegan and Pike were frequently heard; a seminarian named Moore was a teller at convention.

Bishop Manning was certain that, had he called for a coadjutor before his retirement, Charles Gilbert would have been the person elected.² But now that the aging Gilbert was the ordinary of the diocese, it was clearly necessary to find a suffragan who would stand ready to become diocesan if, after several years of trial, he appeared to be suitable. Let it not be thought the clergy are unaware of such contin-

gencies. Very soon after Bishop Gilbert's institution, the two prominent Manhattan rectors mentioned earlier were viewed as active contenders. They were Horace W. B. Donegan and Louis W. Pitt. Donegan had been a New York rector since 1933, and had brought St. James', Madison Avenue, into the forefront of the city's churches. The "St. James Lessons" for Sunday schools were significant in the Church prior to the National Council's expanded Church Teaching Series. Horace Donegan, like Horatio Potter at St. Peter's, Albany, had "minded his own business" in the parish (which then included the large Holy Trinity Chapel, whose vicar was the beloved James Paul). St. James' churchmanship was central.

On the other hand, Louis W. Pitt maintained the older "liberal" stance of Grace Church, Broadway, at a time when, in those postwar years, churchpeople tended toward a redefinition of orthodoxy, with revived interest in tradition. The rector of Grace Church was decidedly not in sympathy with Anglo-Catholicism. Without the principals' encouragement, lines were drawn, sides were chosen, adherents enlisted—and bitter things said. Then both Donegan and Pitt withdrew their names. This meant the diocese was effectively deprived of two good candidates, and others must be found. Easier said than done! It was soon apparent to the Donegan people that they could find no one his equal. "Fourteen magnificent years at St. James' were a matter of record. No one could be more presentable—he had presence—he had shown administrative skill, pastoral concern, he had never promoted himself, could proclaim the Word of God with power," said one of the Donegan supporters long after the election.³ Some of those supporters met at the University Club on May 5, 1947, and after long discussion someone went to telephone Donegan and importune him to allow his name to be put in nomination at the electing convention, which was exactly a week away. Donegan agreed, absented himself from the election, and won on the first ballot.⁴ In 1949 he was elected Bishop Coadjutor by acclamation, and in 1950 became the twelfth Bishop of New York.

Horace William Baden Donegan was born in Derbyshire, England, in 1900 but came to this country at a very early age. He attended St. Stephen's College in Annandale, but soon applied successfully for admission to Oxford. Bernard Iddings Bell, always resentful of any student's desire to leave his tutelage, advised the Oxford authorities that their new charge hadn't the "intellectual capacity" to undertake the rigors of an education there—an appraisal, as it turned out, that was more a reflection upon Bell than it was upon Donegan. For, despite Bell's pessimism, the future bishop managed to do well at Oxford and later at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

He was ordained by Bishop Slattery in 1927, and served with distinction as an assistant at All Saints', Worcester, and rector of Christ Church, Baltimore. He was called to St. James' in 1933 and very soon that somewhat somnolent neighborhood church was faced with a difficulty every vestry dreams of: how can all the congregation find seats?

Bishop Gilbert, a widower, chose to avoid the huge episcopal residence. Mrs. Manning had said it required "six people to keep that four-storied forty-room palace going."⁵ The new bishop elected to live in Ogilvie House; the last dean to live there had been James P. DeWolfe in his brief term prior to becoming the Bishop of Long Island. (When Dean Pike came to the cathedral, he and his family lived very comfortably on the third floor of the Bishop's House.) There was a vague understanding that the new suffragan would live "in the country," so at first Bishop Donegan lived in Westchester County. Very soon, however, he was back in Manhattan, confirmed in the belief that he was not a country boy.

MAKING CHANGES

These sensible housing arrangements are symbolic of the three-year episcopate of Bishop Gilbert. It was a time of neatly folding up the garments of the past, and it was a time of recognizing what new things were required. The Depression and Second World War had prevented the building of new churches in the diocese. At the same time, if our deductions from the records are correct, it had delayed removals from the city and thus had tended to keep the metropolitan churches full. Now that prosperity was evident and population changes obvious in new housing developments, it would be necessary to build new churches. It would also mean that some old churches must be abandoned, but the Church is always loath to face that cold fact. The "cornerstone campaign" initiated in Bishop Gilbert's time was intended to collect capital funds for new churches in the diocese. Prefabricated mission churches caught the imagination. The campaign was moderately successful, and several new churches were built, the last being St. Luke's, Williamsbridge, in 1952.

In 1949 there was a new Committee for College Work. This, too, was a sign of the times. Formerly, Episcopalians were said to attend the church near the college campus and be identified with the life of that parish. Of course, college students required a somewhat feistier fare than a local parish might offer, and in those postwar days there was a host of college chaplains, some of them directly out of the armed services, ready to offer what was wanted: relevant religion. That was the

word: *relevant*. Not unrelated to the existentialism of the most popular books and cocktail conversation of the time, there was abroad in the land a suspicion that the Christian religion did, after all, have something to say about everyday life.

The "strange and perilous times" to which Bishop Gilbert often referred in his addresses and private talks helped foster the search for bedrock realities. For very soon after the peace of 1945 it was plain that civilization was imperiled by the capitalist-Communist tension, which itself might be viewed as proof of God's creation smeared by the waywardness of free will gone awry. The world situation seemed to restate a basic Christian belief. It made earnest college work inevitable. The Episcopal Church's Canterbury Club on the campus, and the chaplain there, found a new respectability. With an arch tolerance of the sweet hymns of his youth, the college student might now engage in long evenings of intellectual wrestling with the topics those same hymns had obliquely mentioned. Everyone knew about discussion groups. There was an undeniable magnetism about many of them. Sometimes beer and sherry were served; four-letter words were often acceptable, even necessary.

DEAN PIKE

The postwar Western world was plainly tired of a futile idealism which the threat of another war made empty and even foolish. Perhaps religious traditions might say persuasively what secular idealism could not. The names of the Niebuhr brothers and Paul Tillich were known to men and women who never darkened a church door. Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich lived in New York. And upriver, Cummins's successor at old Christ Church would, in time, be as well-known as those two scholars. This was James A. Pike. Brought up in the Roman Catholic Church, and a lawyer with a doctoral degree, Pike was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1944. In the two years he was rector of Christ Church he had discomfited the Vassar College authorities in a public row over their stand on religion on the campus and, as partial retaliation for what Pike regarded as Vassar's old-fashioned restrictions against religious groups in the college, he organized a popular weekly discussion session for Vassar undergraduates. His weekend seminarian assistant, Paul Moore, Jr., was not a negative influence in these novel developments at Christ Church. The old church buzzed with "relevant" activities, and a Bryan Green mission there toward the end of 1948 made that parish, and neighboring ones, too, aware of a genuine spirituality among churchpeople who—though they were Episcopalians—

were not fearful of coming forward to sign a pledge of deepened faith.

Clearly, Pike was going places, and the next place was Columbia University. The chapel and university chaplain were yet Episcopal (though the college ceased to be listed as "Episcopal" in the Church yearbooks after 1908). The next move was across Amsterdam Avenue to be dean of the cathedral, to whose wide forum was soon added a Sunday afternoon television program. At the same time, Pike became a member of the Standing Committee, for he was in these days thoroughly involved in the day-by-day concerns of the Church.

The Pike years in the Diocese of New York overlap the episcopates of Gilbert and Donegan, but are discussed here because the career of that fabled man may be seen, in retrospect, as a symbol of Christianity in America during those years now under our scrutiny. Coming from agnosticism (for he gave up his Roman Catholicism early in life) to an enthusiasm about religion in the last years of the Second World War, Pike possessed a unique (there is no other word) ability to commend the faith of the Church to thinking men and women. He had *charisma*—an old Christian word rapidly coming into renewed use by 1950. Some years later, one bishop glumly admitted that a simple announcement on a three-by-five card posted on a college bulletin board would bring crowds of college students to a remote meeting place whereas large posters failed to gather a respectable audience for a better-equipped theologian. He was a wonderful example of the new type of apologist who made the Church heard and pondered in unaccustomed ways, unaccustomed places. "A better class of men is now going into the ministry," sniffed one snobbish layman, unaware that it wasn't the class of men, but the prominence of the subject, that was making the Church not only acceptable but—well, *relevant*. What other reason maintained the Pike television program so long?

Now, years after, we tend to dismiss the postwar "return to religion." The tide did ebb, but who can deny that "authentic Christian spirituality flowed among the more ephemeral streams so deeply entangled with cultural realities," as one historian has asserted?⁶

SAM SHOEMAKER

It should not be thought that James A. Pike was the original piper of Episcopal college students in New York. That honor might be claimed by a long line of distinguished Church people, including Provoost and Morgan Dix, and none with more credentials than Samuel M. Shoemaker of Calvary Church. Here was a man far different from Pike. When Calvary's membership was decreasing, despite the pastoral abil-

ities of its former rector, Theodore Sedgwick, the senior warden, George Zabriskie, convinced the vestry to call Shoemaker to the parish. Desperation proved fruitful. Very soon Calvary Church and its new multifloor parish building became what the rector liked to call a power house. He also liked to be called Sam, and though his preaching was consistently strong through the years, and his administrative abilities far above average, he was at his best in informal sessions with undergraduates at Ivy League colleges. He spoke of lives being "changed" by Christ; his publication, *The Evangel*, was likely to be a somewhat fundamentalist appeal to men and women of his own privileged background. This "mind set"—another Shoemaker term—enabled him to be congenial with the first stages of Frank Buchman's Oxford Group. It also equipped him, a nondrinker, to be an originator of Alcoholics Anonymous. Sophisticated churchpeople were prone to scoff at Shoemaker's simplistic approach to Christianity, but its positive results could not be denied: a prosperous parish church, many men (of various denominations) led to the ministry, and a laity rededicated to faith in Christ. One of the more conspicuous signs of the latter was "Red Cap 42" at Grand Central Station; this was Ralston Young, a longtime railroad employee, who held regularly scheduled prayer meetings in a Pullman car laid over in the terminal. He, too, was part of Sam Shoemaker's widening circle of influence. The Pullman car meetings drew thousands of people over the years. The Shoemaker era was long lived; it began in Manning's early years and grew in strength through Bishop Gilbert's time and into the first years of Bishop Donegan. Unlike Pike, however, Sam Shoemaker could never claim to be symbolic of an era.

We have seen, then, that the Shoemaker meetings at Calvary House had an enduring effect on the Church. And the wide publicity accorded Pike represented an intellectual respectability, nay, invincibility, that commanded wide attention. There was yet a third postwar development, and it was to be perhaps the most influential of all: work in the inner city. There had been a long and honored Anglican tradition of a few priests spending their lives ministering in deprived places: Wilson at Haggerston, Hook of Leeds, the long procession of future notables who served at Stepney and London Docks. In New York, such work had been spasmodic, and probably met with instant discouragement. The English Church, after all, is national and produced more ready-made clients and appreciative witnesses than the Episcopal Church could find in New York. Even the devoted work of the Sisters of St. Mary and the Community of St. John Baptist aroused less public attention than, say, the Episcopal boys' choirs that sprang up in the later years of the nineteenth century at fashionable churches.

Now, however, and partly because of Michonneau's widely read

Revolution in a City Parish, translated into English in 1949, renewed work began in far-deteriorated and forgotten places in cities. Churches there had perforce been forgotten during the Depression and during the war. Bishops in the metropolitan area cooperated with the new spirit because, along with the much-trumpeted "return to religion," they had on their hands dozens of once-prosperous brownstone churches that would never regain a vestige of their gilded past. Trinity Church, always a power in the Diocese of New York, responded in particular by sponsoring vigorous activity in its St. Augustine's Chapel, whose vicar then was Kilmer Myers.

COMMUNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Bishop Gilbert's three-year episcopate was drawing to a close when the Community of the Holy Spirit established itself in New York. Its story is as interesting as that of the other two distinctly New York Orders for women, the Community of St. Mary and the Community of St. John Baptist, and like them it was founded by a native of the city. Ruth Younger was born and grew up in New York City; she attended St. Philip's Church and St. Luke's, Hudson Street. Later, after her family moved to Canada, Miss Younger realized her life's vocation would be in a teaching Order, an ideal she fulfilled for many years in Canada. But when her Order decided to terminate its teaching work, Sister Ruth found it difficult to enter other pursuits, for she knew her gifts. She was given leave by her Order to come to New York. Bishop Gilbert extended a cordial permission; "he was so kind and so good and so understanding of what we were up to," recalled Mother Ruth many years later⁷ (for, in time she became Mother Superior of the new Community of the Holy Spirit). Canon Green at the cathedral suggested the Canadians begin a kindergarten on Morningside Heights, for he thought there was great need for the children of the many professional people connected with Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, St. Luke's Hospital, and the other expanding facilities near the cathedral. Canon West helped locate a house in 113th Street, and the school—soon to be St. Hilda's and St. Hugh's—began with eight little children.

The Order became autonomous in 1952, and the name was chosen partly because it was plain to the original Sisters that their move to New York, and their subsequent activity there, had been Spirit-led. The Rule of the Community of the Holy Spirit is based on traditional monastic lines, with close alignment with that of the Oxford Mission to Calcutta. The Community's school building in 114th Street was made necessary several years after that first class of eight met, and all grades through

high school were added year by year. In fact, the New York school was so successful and so busy that the Sisters wondered if their corporate spiritual life was not endangered. Therefore, it was determined to purchase a place of retreat in the country and, after some search, a fine place in Brewster was chosen. Now, it too has a school as well as houses for retreats and conferences.

The founding of the Community of the Holy Spirit was a quiet episode in the history of the diocese. There were no fierce Protestant objections in the Church. Bishop Gilbert did not feel obliged to make excuses for what the Sisters were doing, and who they were; those troubles which Horatio Potter and Henry C. Potter had to confront were now absent. This in itself does much to describe the Episcopal Church in New York (and probably elsewhere) at mid-century, and is underscored by the fact that Bishop Gilbert would never label himself either High Church or an Anglo-Catholic.

His three years and more as Bishop of New York were exactly right in preparing for the long episcopate of his successor that lay ahead. It is tempting to compare the brief Wainwright period with that of Gilbert—and we shall give in to temptation! For both men in their brief times were enabled to be effective bridges between one definite period and another. Had there been no bridge, there would have been unnecessary abrasions for the man to follow. The “mildness and grace” of Wainwright proved to be a reconciliatory factor that bade people forget the past acrimonies. Bishop Gilbert’s frank lack of interest in administrative tasks and his keen awareness of present-day difficulties enabled the diocese to realize that the Bishop of New York could well delegate his important work among capable persons. The stage, then, was set for Horace W. B. Donegan.