
Country Clergy

I hardly qualify as country clergy anymore, but I sure do salute them.

Nine months ago, in the depths of the pandemic, when we clergy were all struggling to hold parishes together, using whatever resources we had, I specifically saluted country clergy. I said,

"...we are all country parsons these days. (In fact, whether we are ordained or not, we are all "country parsons"!). In particular, I salute those leaders of smaller communities of faith who have been gallantly trying to lead their flocks in the midst of pandemic isolation and frustration and impatience and real struggle.

Here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, we benefit enormously from our ability to gather outside, to livestream some services, and to assemble several online services every week, with real grace and excellence, all at once. I am glad for that. But I also realize that not every parish, or community of faith, has been able to do that.

So, my principle during this pandemic Christianity is to encourage people to support their local parish, and whatever that parish is doing. Whatever your parish is doing, it is probably doing the right thing; it is being true to its identity. There is no way that every parish can be a mega-parish these days, with superbly polished technical productions! In these days, the best thing for both smaller, and larger, parishes, is to be true to our identities, with neither regret nor boasting. Be true to who we are, and God will bless us during this Lenten wilderness."

Then, a few weeks ago, I was both humbled and honored to receive an honorary doctor of divinity degree from Sewanee, The University of the South. I thank all of you who have offered congratulations! In my thinking, however, what Sewanee was recognizing was my devotion and commitment to parish ministry. So, I accepted that degree with thanksgiving for the parish ministries of many a faithful priest. Many of us, so many of us, are who we are because of faithful parish priests.

At Sewanee, when they asked me to offer a presentation about how I found my way to Sewanee, I said, *"I have given my ordained life in the Episcopal Church to parish ministry, over and over again; and, for me, Sewanee, and the University of the South, are the epitome of parish ministry. It is holy life. Faithful people, through thick and thin, learning and living with each other, in the presence of grace and in the presence of God, are what parish ministry is. Parish ministry is family, friends, the domain. Being lost and being found, in parish ministry, is how I found my way to Sewanee."*

Yes, I believe in parish ministry. I truly believe that, over time, faithful and healthy parish ministry will save the world.

In that spirit, I offer the poetry of someone who I believe understood the gruel and the devotion of parish clergy, that gruel and that devotion being so often unnoticed. He is the poet, R.S. Thomas. Here is his poem:

THE COUNTRY CLERGY

I see them working in old rectories
By the sun's light, by candlelight,
Venerable men, their black cloth
A little dusty, a little green
With holy mildew. And yet their skulls,
Ripening over so many prayers,
Topped into the same grave
With oafs and yokels. They left no books,
Memorial to their lonely thought

In grey parishes; rather they wrote
On men's hearts and in the minds
Of young children sublime words
Too soon forgotten. God in his time
Or out of time will correct this.

[R.S. Thomas, in *Collected Poems, 1945–1990* (London: Dent, 1993), 82]

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Rev. Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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