

WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 1

[WrigHom1]

J. Robert Wright's Legacy: Ecumenism for a Dangerous Time

A Sermon Preached at the Solemn Requiem Mass for:

The Rev. Canon J. Robert Wright

May 19, 2022

The Chapel of the Good Shepherd

The General Theological Seminary

New York, New York

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bishop Dietsche, Dean Delashmutt, Honored guests---

It is indeed

a great honor to join you today in giving thanks for the life of our friend, colleague, and teacher, J. Robert Wright.

And there is no better place for us to gather than in this chapel — our mother church, our spiritual home, our place of pilgrimage. As students, as faculty, as staff, as friends of this seminary, we know that the presence of the Lord is in this place.

## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 2

Many of us have spent many hours here — at daily chapel, on holy days, and at special events. How well we know the way the sunlight illuminates the stained glass and lifts our worship with the beauty of holiness.

The presence of this chapel on Chelsea Square — inside the Close, where the noise and the clamor of the city fade away — tells the world that this institution is here to form priests ... and emphasizes the centrality of the liturgy in that priestly formation. That is the work Father Wright did for 44 years as historian, theologian, bridge-builder, and teacher.

Father Wright used to say that attendance at daily chapel was his way of tracking how his students were doing. If those who attended regularly abruptly started skipping chapel ... or if those who seldom showed up were suddenly here twice a day, praying mightily ... he'd know it was time for a conversation about what was going on in their lives.

Right over there is the faculty stall that J. Robert Wright occupied in worship for more than 40 years. Right above his stall is carved the word ECCLESIA — church — part of the carving of the Latin translation of

## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 3

the prayer for the consecration of a priest in the Book of Common Prayer that crosses around this chapel.

Today we celebrate Canon Wright's crossing into eternity. We join to commend him to the deathless love and transfiguring mercy of God who, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, draws us all, the living and the dead, into that vast fellowship of love and prayer we call the Communion of Saints. He devoted himself to the words we just heard in our reading from John: *One flock, one shepherd.....yes, one Communion.*

That Communion of Saints was not only the focus of Father Wright's life, labor, and scholarship. It is his legacy and his challenge to us when we go forth from this place. The Ecumenical Movement he championed — *that we all may be one* — is the justice and peace movement for which our broken, war-torn, and terrified nation and world yearns.

\*\*\*

From the late nineteenth century, the U.S. Episcopal Church has been a significant leader of the Ecumenical Movement. The second half of the twentieth century was a golden age of progress towards the unity of the Churches, with the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, made up of the Anglican, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox Churches ...

## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 4

and expanded with the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the Ecumenical Movement at the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

The goal of this movement is “full communion,” a concrete, visual realization of the communion among people of faith through the full interchange and sharing of the sacraments, baptism, and Holy Communion, as well as the common sharing of ordained ministers and priests across denominational boundaries.

It is to this that J. Robert Wright dedicated himself.

Canon Wright's primary role was as a behind-the-scenes advisor to Presiding Bishops ... theological consultant ... and official representative of the Episcopal Church in negotiating full communion agreements, and in navigating encounters with world Christian leaders, all of which made the Episcopal Church increasingly during his lifetime a more active partner in the world community of Christian believers.

In 2008 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, awarded Canon Wright the Archbishop of Canterbury's Cross of St. Augustine, honoring his role as advisor and guide to many archbishops and bishops throughout the world-wide Anglican Communion.

## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 5

Tobias Haller recalls seeing Father Wright at an event shortly after he received the Cross of St. Augustine. “He was so proud!” Tobias tells us. “He was like a little boy who'd just received a prized toy — literally giddy. He leaned over and whispered, smiling ear to ear, ‘You know ... I slept with it on my pillow last night!’ “

And yet there was a side to this role that was not glamorous at all: long weekends spent in conference centers, with bad food and tedious negotiations, hammering out agreements on fine points of theology that might lead to full communion. There were great successes in achieving goals of unity, but also setbacks and disappointments on the way.

Canon Wright was particularly interested in the official dialogues of the Episcopal Church with the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

However, when the ordination of women as priests and bishops was officially authorized by the Episcopal Church in 1976, a move Canon Wright first opposed, then vigorously supported ...

## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 6

and then, when Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold consecrated the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church in 2003, and the Episcopal Church in 2018 authorized a liturgy for same-gender weddings ...

progress toward full communion with the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Churches came more and more to a halt.

And yet Canon Wright's ambassadorial mission to these two Church bodies did not come to an end. His gift for friendship and hospitality — aimed at maintaining relations with these two Church bodies — did not wither.

He nurtured a deep personal friendship with Edward Egan, the Cardinal Archbishop of New York from 2000 to 2009. Their friendship began when the Cardinal, then a priest, served as Secretary of the New York Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenism. Once, when Canon Wright broke his ankle, with one call to Cardinal Egan, Father Wright was sent to Catholic Rehabilitation of New York City, and he was given the Cardinal's suite for his recovery stay.

## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 7

When Cardinal Egan hosted Pope Benedict XVI in New York in 2008, the Cardinal made it possible for the Pope to honor Father Wright with a papal pontifical medal.

Canon Wright maintained equally close ties with the Orthodox Churches. He helped restore the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava in Manhattan — a former Episcopal church — after a fire in 2016. He received many honors from the leaders of the Orthodox Churches. On his frequent trips to the Holy Land to meet with Orthodox prelates, he became known as a shrewd barterer for ancient coins and antique rugs in the Jerusalem marketplace.

Of all of Canon Wright's contributions to the Ecumenical Movement, none has been more significant than his path-breaking work in Anglican-Lutheran relations: the achievement of full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Wright was the principal Episcopal architect and drafter of *Called to Common Mission* (1999), which allowed the two Churches to declare officially full communion at a joint service at the Washington National Cathedral on January 6, 2001. Theologian Michael Root has said that full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical

WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 8

Lutheran Church of America would not have come to pass without J. Robert Wright's unflagging commitment."

\*\*\*

It was here on this seminary campus that Father Wright found his community, his own Communion of Saints.

Here he was "J-Bob" ... "Professor Xeroxes" ... "Bob the Walking Footnote."

Some of his students from the Class of '81, members of the basketball team that he coached for 44 years, recall waiting in the gym one night for their coach to arrive. "In came Dr. Wright, black suit and tab collar, carrying a sheaf of papers in his hand," one student recalls. "Were they basketball plays? Our schedule? They were the notes to a scholarly lecture on the relationship between *Athleoo* and *Askeoo* in the Patristic writings, which he delivered to us, shorts, sneakers, and all. Only at General! Only with Dr. J. Robert Wright!"

Another former student, Lee Powers, recalls that he and Joel Ireland and Bill Cavanaugh visited Father Wright just before the pandemic set in. "We brought him his favorite dinner, coconut shrimp from Red Lobster,



## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 9

but we forgot the dipping sauce. He refused my several offers to go back and get the sauce, saying it wasn't necessary. But with each bite we could hear him say softly, 'This would be so much better with that sauce.' Only Father Wright could make three priests with over 30 years' ministry experience feel like idiots."

I know we will hear many more "J-Bob" stories at the reception after this service. But beyond his quirks and eccentricities — his hated cell phone! His beloved Mass class! Teddy the Mop! — there is this, in the words of another student: "He will be remembered because of the impact he had on the lives and ministry of his students. He will always be remembered as a mentor, one who helped form many for service in the Church and beyond. J. Robert Wright poured his life into his many and varied interests; and he poured his life into his students as well. I am sure that every faculty advisor at GTS had profound impacts on their advisees, but I would argue that few had as much an impact on seminarians' formation as did Father Wright."

\*\*\*

Our closing hymn this morning is "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones," and I can think of no better definition of the Community of Saints to which we all belong — as members of this seminary community; in our

WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 10

roles in the Episcopal Church; and in the wider world, that ecumenical web of grace that binds us together in a communion of communities.

Father Wright's scholarship ties together the earliest church; the medieval period; and the 18th-century developments ... to teach the 21st century about balancing the autonomy of a local religious community with the coherence of a universal church.

Our membership in the Communion of Saints reminds us that we share in the fellowship and encouragement, the heroism and sanctity of both the holy ones of previous centuries and cultures AND also our contemporaries who live and die for the faith and in the faith—now.

\*\*\*

So how might the power of this Communion of Saints be used most effectively in the terrified world outside these doors, beyond the Close, around the world? We witness a dangerous war in Europe, the rise of Christian Nationalism and Replacement Theory Fascism played out in the bloodshed at the Tops Market in Buffalo on Saturday afternoon, May 14.

WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 11

A few nights ago I met David Nirenberg, a Jewish medievalist and intellectual historian, the new director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He asked me this pointed question:

“Why aren’t the great Protestant denominations” — he meant us too, of course — “why aren’t you really fighting together rising U.S. fascism today?”

Why indeed. The Ecumenical Movement for which Father Wright worked for so many years, and which we treasure today, has the potential to be a Justice and Peace Movement the world desperately needs. Why are we ecumenical partners not using the power of our commitment to each other to push back against those who would weaponize faith and make narrow religious belief a loyalty test?

Our own Margaret Rose, the Presiding Bishop’s Deputy for Ecumenical and Interreligious work was on a panel on the future of ecumenism at the National Workshop on Unity recently, along with representatives of other Churches, and she listed some of the panel’s observations for me:

## WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 12

“One, that as the last three years of pandemic, political division, and economic hardship have shown so clearly, we now “share in the ecumenism of suffering.

“Two, we must listen for what divides us — the legacy of slavery, for example — and then exchange the gifts that enrich us all in our unity.”

“Third, we must acknowledge that religion is no longer a private, Sunday morning personal matter. It is front-page news every day, intertwined with Supreme Court decisions, threats against those of other faiths, and religious autocracies at home and abroad.

\*\*\*

In my final conversations with him, J. Robert Wright shared with me the same concerns.

For J. Robert Wright was never bashful about affirming that his life was in service to his God, whatever the cost. He said, “I do everything for my Lord and Savior.” Our opportunity is to go and do the same. God has used God’s people to accomplish great things in the past. How will God use us — if we will but respond to the divine initiative — to accomplish great things today?

WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY

MAY 19, 2021

Page 13

Bishop Andy Doyle of Texas came close to Bob's thinking, toward the end, when Bishop Doyle wrote these words on Facebook last Sunday, May 15: "Every tradition needs to clearly denounce White Supremacy and Nazism. What we see in Buffalo is part of a well-established neo-Nazi movement in the US. We cannot underestimate this movement. White Supremacy is a global lie that perpetuates a false god, faux theodicy, and violence." And what if many traditions were to stand together, this as a communion of Communion, one United Body?

At this hour of urgency, may we all be bound to the mission for which J. Robert Wright gave his life: that we all may be one!

Amen!

\*\*\*\*\*

Preacher's Identification: The Rt. Rev. Dr. R. William Franklin is XIth Bishop of the Diocese of Western New York (resigned). He currently serves as Assisting Bishop of the Diocese of Long Island, and he is a member of the faculty of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He served as Professor of Church History and World Mission in the SPRL Chair and Professor of Modern Anglican Studies at the General Theological Seminary, 1993-1998.

**WRIGHT MEMORIAL HOMILY**

**MAY 19, 2021**

Page 14