Holy Happy Hour—October 8, 2026

St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church and Pro-Cathedral

Catholic or Protestant?

The Anglican *Via Media*

Frederick Erickson, "Via Media," *Dare to Hope* (blog), Church of the Ascension and Saint Agnes (August 18, 2020)

Here is a brain teaser to consider today. Anglicanism has since the 16th and 17th centuries been characterized as taking a "middle way," *via media*; a "mean" between Protestant and Catholic belief and practice. There are two quite differing ways of understanding this metaphorically—a mean as identified through arithmetic calculation or through geometric construction.

We usually think of a mean as derived through arithmetic calculation. To find the average height in inches among a set of individuals you sum the heights of all the individuals in the set and then divide that total by the number of persons in the set. But a mean can also be identified by geometric construction. Euclid taught us that you can find the midpoint on a horizontal line by using a compass (a geometric instrument consisting of two legs joined at one end and open at the other). You fix both legs at a wide angle between them. Then you set the foot of one leg at the leftmost edge of the line, and with the foot of the other leg you inscribe an arc just past the middle of the line. Then you set the foot of that leg at the rightmost edge of the line and with the foot of the opposite leg you inscribe another arc, crossing the first. Finally, a line drawn down vertically between the places where the two arcs intersect at top and bottom will bisect the horizontal line at its exact midpoint.

The Anglican *via media* is better conceived as geometrically constructed rather than as arithmetically calculated. On a horizontal line one foot of the compass is set at the leftmost edge of Protestant thought and action. Anchored there the compass's opposite foot inscribes an arc. Then that foot of the compass is set at the rightmost edge of Catholic thought and action, which anchors it for the opposite foot's inscribing the other arc. In other words, a "middle way" comes from having one foot anchored at one extreme and the other foot anchored at the other extreme. This is not averaging across a set of numbers. Rather it is an affirmation of polar opposites, both/and rather than

either/or—affirming truths which might seem to contradict each other but which can live together in a whole that is unified, not by the elimination or smoothing over of difference, but by holding distinct difference together in creative tension.

This is all pretty abstract, and it doesn't give clear and simple guidance for how we should act in everyday life as Christians. But there is a certain nobility and generosity of spirit in the Anglican attempt to be fully and genuinely Catholic, affirming the best in that, while at the same time being fully and genuinely Protestant, affirming the best in that. As Anglicans we are easily accused of too much waffling, and indeed our teaching sometimes mumbles. Still there is much to be said for the aim of living out a Christian *via media* even though it's hard to do. It's fair to say that an Anglican is someone who wants to be Catholic and Protestant at the same time.

Examples of the *Via Media*

Erickson distinguishes between an *arithmetic mean* (averaging opposing positions) and a *geometric mean* (holding opposing convictions together in creative tension). What does that look like in practice?

Tension	**Anglican/Episcopal expression**
Catholic and Protestant	We retain bishops, creeds, sacraments, and historic liturgy while embracing Reformation commitments to Scripture, preaching, and worship in the language of the people.
Scripture and tradition	We regard Scripture as authoritative while interpreting it through the Church's inherited wisdom, reason, scholarship, and lived experience.
Common prayer and the "big tent" of diverse beliefs	We worship together using shared (authorized) liturgies without requiring complete agreement about every theological question.