

Society for Ecumenical Studies

The Spirituality of Ecumenical Dialogue

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The aim of this paper is not to look at specific dialogues, or even to look at specific topics across the range of dialogues, but rather to examine the overall place of dialogue within the Christian life of communion. I would argue that ecumenical dialogue is not just aimed at facilitating the restoration of unity. It is, in itself, an integral and inseparable part of growing into communion. As we engage in dialogue together, so our as yet imperfect communion is deepened and enhanced. We grow in hope and faith that the same Spirit that has led us to pursue dialogue and seek unity will Himself eventually crown our endeavours, begun under His guidance, with the gift of restored unity.

My inspiration for this paper comes, above all, from the present Pope's encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, which devotes so much consideration to the place of dialogue, not so much in terms of its content, though the Holy Father does refer to that, as in terms of its underlying spiritual, theological and philosophical basis. I hope, in addition, to explore the ecclesiological basis and implications of dialogue. The very fact of engagement in dialogue implies a degree of mutual ecclesial recognition between the churches involved. Such recognition does not imply that each partner necessarily possesses everything regarded by the other partner as necessary to full ecclesial authenticity, but it does imply a mutual recognition that at least elements of the mystery of the Church are discernible in each other. In turn, this relates to an active understanding of the role of the *sensus fidelium* in the reconciliation and edification of the churches as the one Church of Christ. For it must eventually be a renewed *consensus fidelium* a renewed unanimity of the

whole people of God, enlightened by that supernatural anointing and knowledge of which St John speaks (1 John 2.20), in discerning within each particular tradition and each local church the mystery of the presence of the Universal Church, that leads us into the full unity that God wills and for which Christ prayed.

Dialogue is a key aspect of that 'speaking the truth in love' of which Paul speaks in the letter to the Ephesians (4.15). It is an activity of the Church in the course of its developing maturity. It is integral to its total witness as sign of love. It has long been recognised that the translation of the word *aletheuontes* from Ephesians as 'speaking the truth in love' is not fully adequate, rather, it is a matter of 'doing the truth in love', in which words are accompanied by deeds that authenticate them and witness to their truth. The Holy Father stresses in *Ut Unum Sint* that dialogue must proceed out of an atmosphere of prayer; (1) likewise, one may argue that it only reaches its full potential in deeds of love in which the partners 'receive' one another just as Christians in the apostolic Church received visitors from other churches. The importance of the role of friendship, and of acts of mutual humble service in ecumenism and the deepening of communion, cannot be overemphasized.

We begin by looking at the general philosophical considerations, so clearly indicated in *Ut Unum Sint*. The Pope places dialogue in the widest possible human context, reminding us that it is something natural and integral to human nature as willed and devised by the Creator. No doubt in our sinful world it requires the perfection of grace, but, nevertheless, it is something intrinsic to human nature as God has ordered it, and thus part of God's will for all humankind and not just for the Church. The Pope argues that 'dialogue is rooted in the nature of the person and his dignity'. He asserts that it is 'an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community'. He thus contends that it is part of the necessary cultural development of all human beings, who, in order to appropriate all that human life can offer in terms of their own individual mental growth and that of their communities, must be involved in a constant process of mutual learning with and from others, a

process involving both giving and receiving. The Pope states precisely that a human being cannot 'fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself', an action of reciprocity and love. (2) One might interpret this in terms both of a humble willingness to receive, and to have one's ideas and ways adjusted as a result of the witness of others, and in terms of a willingness to give and contribute to others. Though the Pope does not make this specific link, one can also argue that dialogue is intimately related to our nature as created in the 'image' of God. It is precisely because we are created in that image that we are called to share with others as part of our growing realization of our potential as mature children of God. We are also sisters and brothers of Christ, sharing in his mission and work. Dialogue is a central part of Christian living. It is part of that process to which we are called in the Gospels of 'bearing much fruit', fruit that endures, in the service of the Church and the wider human community alike.

I want to emphasize this point strongly. Important as their contribution undoubtedly is, dialogue is not just something for theological experts at national and international levels. It should also be happening, indeed it must happen at the most local level. At the local level, dialogue will not be concerned so much with formal theological issues as with common exploration of how to live the faith together in everyday life and witness, reaching beyond the formal boundaries of the Church to the wider communities in which we are involved.

We often talk, quite rightly, of the supreme importance of 'reception'. It is certainly true that the achievements of the formal international dialogues desperately need to be better received at all levels, but that reception needs also to be complemented by the reception of which I am now talking, that of the faith and insight of the Christian 'troops on the ground' in their respective contiguous local churches as they share in the common pilgrimage. Such parallel reception is essential in order that the hearts and minds of the faithful at grassroots level be open to mutual recognition of each other and each others' local churches as fellow Christians and sister churches on a convergent pilgrimage towards unity. Many of the groups that met, in 1986, to

study the booklet, *What on Earth is the Church for?*⁽³⁾ as part of the *Not Strangers But Pilgrims* process still testify to the progress in understanding and recognition communion made at that time. Having our eyes opened to each others' Christian faith and life is essential if we are to grow in love and trust and from that to recognition of the life of the one Church in each other. Through an emphasis on dialogue as part of human relatedness, we are reminded of the missionary vocation and orientation of ecumenical dialogue and, indeed, all ecumenism. We engage in dialogue in order that we may be one, 'that the world may believe'. The world should be able to see in us a true pattern of living in dialogue and community. In a world too often characterized by controversy and conflict, Christian dialogue can present the healing and hopeful contrast of a method of solving problems and disagreements that is co-operative and communal, not conflictual and adversarial. In short, true dialogue has an evangelical value.

An emphasis upon 'speaking the truth in love' reminds us that the purpose of dialogue is not false eirenicism or fudge, but genuine engagement with issues that have, thus far, proved difficult and church-dividing. Theological dialogue aims to do three things: firstly, to clear the ground of misconceptions within the churches involved about each other's teaching and practice; secondly, to identify points of convergence and divergence that can then be addressed unambiguously; finally, to move forward, where possible, in the light of a new common rereading of the Tradition according to commonly accepted sources. Thus, in ARCIC, the stated intention has always been to 'return to the commonly accepted sources of Scripture and the Early Church'. ⁽⁴⁾ In the Catholic-Methodist dialogue, the method adopted in the early quinquennia was one of mutual exploration of the spiritual traditions of the two churches and, particularly in the third session, of their experience and understanding of the work of the Spirit amongst them.'⁽⁵⁾ Dialogue is a joint act of obedience, firstly to the words of the Apostle who calls on us to 'prefer one another in honour' and to 'submit ourselves to one another out of love for Him', but secondly and supremely to the Christ who speaks precisely to us today though his word, through the Tradition of the Church and through the variety of charisms with which, through the Holy Spirit, he enriches his Church. In this

process, as the Pope stresses, we experience genuine conversion, conversion to a wider common vision accompanied by repentance for the wrongs we have done to each other in the past and the narrowness of vision that so often characterized them.(6)

Mutual 'speaking the truth in love' implies a mutual humility and receptivity as churches listen to and Submit themselves, under the Spirit, to the possibility of mutual correction. A common ecclesiological renewal, centring on the ecclesiology of the Pilgrim Church and the ecclesiology of *koinonia* undergirds this process. Acceptance of a pilgrim church ecclesiology implies that the partner churches recognize that the Church has not yet arrived at its eschatological plenitude of faith, love and knowledge. It implies acknowledgement that the Church is still developing, that it is still liable to wander from the straight path and to distortion in its life, resulting both from human sinfulness and from sheer human finitude of understanding. These points were strongly made in the most recent ARCIC report, The Gift of Authority. I cite, in particular, para 31 :

When Christian communities are in real but imperfect communion, they are called to recognise in each other elements of the Apostolic tradition that they may have rejected, forgotten or not yet fully understood. Consequently, they have to receive or reappropriate these elements and reconsider the ways in which they have separately interpreted the Scriptures.

This process of 're-reception', spoken of in ARCIC, has already begun. It can be seen, for example, in the processes of liturgical revision in which the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Methodist churches have moved from liturgical styles that formerly over-emphasized particular aspects of the eucharistic mystery at the expense of others to a more balanced and largely common emphasis on the dynamic memorial of the paschal events and the foretaste of the Kingdom celebrated by the whole People of God. It can be seen in the way in which the Roman Catholic Church moved at and after Vatican II to a much more positive evaluation of the eastern churches. It can

be seen in the increasing willingness of Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic to restore the eucharist to a more central place in worship and not to exalt the word of preaching above it.

A theology of the Pilgrim Church implies not just that the Church is capable of wandering from its appointed path, but that, also, the Holy Spirit is capable of recalling it to its 'providential way' and leading it into a more fully balanced reception and practice of the Christian life. A valuable example of this process can be found in a recent piece of work by the British Roman Catholic-Methodist Committee, *Mary, Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness*. (7) In this statement, the Methodists concede that Scripture points to Mary as model disciple and exemplar for the Church. They accept that this truth has been largely neglected in previous Methodist history and that there is now a need for Methodists to look again at Mary in the light of Scripture. The document also makes it clear that while Methodists cannot accept all current Roman Catholic dogmatic teaching concerning Mary, they can appreciate some of the truths that the dogmas of 1854 and 1950 are intended to undergird.

Above all, the ecclesiology of *koinonia*, of communion is important. With its implication that throughout the Church of Christ, and reaching across all boundaries between particular churches as well as across all generations of Christian experience, there is a constant circulation of love and insight, involving simultaneously the *sensus fidei* of the People of God, their proving of their faith in practice, and the teaching office of the duly authorized pastors of the Church. Within the Ecumenical Movement, we talk frequently of being in 'imperfect communion' with each other. Sometimes, as in the Catholic-Orthodox relationship, this state of communion is said to be 'almost perfect'. We need to recognize that this implies a positive duty to listen to, learn from and receive from each other. We need to remember how much, already, we have received from each other. This point was early stressed in the Wesleyan tradition by W. J. Shrewsbury, when he asserted, contemplating the heritage that his people had received alike from Anglicans, Puritans and many continental Protestants, that the 'Methodists are debtors of all'. (8) It is in the work of joint exploration of the Tradition in dialogue that we realise experientially our nature both as Pilgrim Church and Church in communion.

Charles Wesley puts it this way in his great hymn, 'Thou God of truth and love'. I cite verses 2 and 3 and then the last couplet of verse 4:

*Why hast Thou cast our lot
In the same age and place;
And why together brought
To see each other's face:
To join with loving sympathy,
And mix our friendly souls in thee?*

*Didst Thou not make us one,
That we might one remain,
Together travel on,
And bear each other's pain;
Will all Thy utmost goodness prove,
And rise renewed in perfect love?
And kindly help each other on
Till all receive the starry crown. (9)*

It is in this process that we help to open each others' eyes to those aspects of the ongoing, developing Tradition of the Church that, in the words of ARCIC, we may have neglected, distorted, or even not yet begun to receive at all. (10)

At the heart of our experience of dialogue as an act of *koinonia* is the 'exchange of gifts', an exchange that implies both generosity and humility in giving and receiving. There are welcome signs of this happening; for example in the repeated affirmation of the willingness of British Methodists to receive the gift of the sign of the episcopal succession and the indications by Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists alike that they are willing to consider circumstances and situations in which they might affirm the Petrine ministry.(11)

As we come closer together, so we realise increasingly the potential of our imperfect, but growing communion for fuller reconciliation. Repentance as well

as humility is involved in the context of a *koinonia* that prays daily for forgiveness and the grace to forgive. The Pope has again set the Church an example in this. On a recent visit to the Czech Republic he asked forgiveness from those Protestant churches that had formerly been persecuted by Roman Catholics. We need also to repent of narrowness of vision and of those times when we have placed loyalty to our individual confessions above loyalty to the totality of the Apostolic Tradition. There is a fine line to be drawn between a proper loyalty to the particular tradition and church within which we have found the reality of God's grace and a false 'confessionalism' which triumphalistically exalts its self-understanding above that of other churches, sometimes refusing even the most cursory examination of their life and teaching.(12) In dialogue, we have constantly to ask ourselves whether the truth cannot be better expressed in newer formulations that reconcile previous insights which must now be held in balanced tension rather than in contradiction.

The great German Catholic ecclesiologist, Möhler, had a very lively sense of the relationship between unity and diversity in the Church which extended to the exchange of theological insights. For him, the 'integrity of the Faith does not consist in the sum of all truths but in the living exchange, within the Church, of doctrinal truths that manifest in different ways the one reality lived in faith and charity'. According to Möhler, contrasting positions, provided they are held within the living communion of the Church, can express different aspects of reality. When held in tension within living communion, rather than being polarized in opposition out of it, they may be corrected by what Yves Congar calls 'a openness to the complementary aspect'. (13)

I would stress this last point, when 'lived in communion'. Already the degree of communion established in and through dialogue has enabled several doctrinal breakthroughs. There have been the accords established between the Roman Catholic Church and various Oriental Orthodox churches on christology and parallel ones involving the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox. In these agreements, it has been established that the alternative christological formulations of Chalcedon and the Oriental 'one nature of God Incarnate'

need no longer be seen as contradictory but rather as legitimately alternative ways of confessing the same mystery. Most recently, there has been the agreement on Justification between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. This has been accompanied by the statement that the two churches still retain their different emphases within their accounts of the process of justification but that the two accounts need no longer be seen, in themselves, as contradictory and church-dividing.(14)

A particular feature of two multilateral dialogues has been the acceptance, by the partners concerned, of the discipline of re-examining their individual churches' faith and practice in the light of their loyalty to the Apostolic Tradition as a whole. Thus, in the *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* process of the World Council of Churches, the participating traditions were challenged, in the final text, to say how far they discerned in it not convergence with their own particular denominational tradition but 'the faith of the Church across the ages'. They were also asked to say what lessons they could draw from it for their own practice and catechesis.(15) In other words, all churches involved were being implicitly asked to contemplate the possibility, later starkly stated in the quotation I have already made from the recent ARCIC text, that there might have been distortion or loss of balance involved in the development of their own confessional tradition. In a slightly different manner, the churches that participated in the recent ecclesiological process of Churches Together in England, *Called To be One*, were also asked to 'examine their own bonds of communion'. This was an attempt to get them to identify how adequately their structures enabled them to express their continuity across time and space and to practise mutual accountability. (16)

Further challenges were thrown out to individual churches or groups of churches. Thus, for example, the free churches were invited to discuss with the Church of England the recent understanding of 'apostolicity' and ministry implicit in the Porvoo Agreement. The Baptists and Congregationalists, as churches that have formerly had particular problems with personal episcopacy, were invited to discuss with the Church of England its understanding of itself as 'synodically governed and episcopally led'. (17)

Conversely, churches that emphasized the importance of structures of continuity were encouraged to 'consider what churchly significance they should give to churches which have maintained a consistent Christian witness over a considerable period of years without such visible elements as creeds, baptism, eucharist or an ordained ministry? What weight was to be given to a *koinonia* not supported and expressed by these visible means?' (18)

In *Ut Unum Sint*, the Pope drew attention to five issues that are still perceived as particularly difficult in dialogue between the Roman Catholic and other Western churches. These are the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, the nature of the eucharist, the nature of ordination, the nature of the teaching authority of the Church and the role of the Mother of God. (19) I would claim that substantial progress has been made in all five areas, most particularly the first two to which the Montreal Conference of 1963 and the BEM-Lima document of 1982 especially contributed. I believe that the reception, by other churches as well as by the two partners immediately concerned, of the Catholic/Methodist statement on Mary, could help substantially with the last, whilst recent work on apostolicity, the Roman Catholic-Methodist accord on the fundamentally pastoral nature of ministry (20) and the work of *The Gift of Authority* make substantial contributions to the third and fourth points, whilst leaving much yet to be done in these two fields. (21)

In all that has happened in dialogue thus far, we see a growing concern for the fuller appreciation and recognition of the life of the one Church, as a whole, as opposed to the partiality of its manifestation within any one particular tradition. We see a new, wider loyalty arising within which we confess that we must be prepared even to judge our own past in order to be loyal to the greater fullness to which we are committed. Again, humility in giving and receiving, in sharing and in willingness to have our emphases corrected and complemented, is at stake. We can see this in the Pope's simultaneous insistence, in *Ut Unum Sint*, that the Roman Catholic Church has alone preserved a unique ministry that she holds in trust for the whole of Christendom and longs to share with it, and his acceptance that the manner in

which this ministry has been exercised in the past life of the Roman Catholic communion, has not necessarily been appropriate and now needs rethinking in the light of the witness and advice of others. (22)

Within the Wesleyan tradition, we can find a similar emphasis within the thought of the early Wesleyan ecumenist, William James Shrewsbury. He emphasized as a Wesleyan virtue 'disinterestedness', by which he meant the discipline and capacity for recognizing Christian truth wherever it is found, regardless of whether it was found amongst those who treat the Methodist people with respect and love or not. It is an objective rejoicing in the richness and variety of the gifts of the Spirit given and distributed amongst the many particular churches. (23)

In our search to be ever more deeply converted to that common Apostolic Tradition in all its depth and legitimate variety, we need to bear in mind the importance alike of the ministry of memory and the ministry of prophetic insight. The first constantly directs us to our origins, reminding us of the centrality of the paschal events, of Pentecost and of the eucharistic mystery as memorial of both past and present salvation. The latter directs us towards the coming kingdom, also, according to St Maximus the Confessor, related to the eucharist as 'memorial of the things to come' and to the constant call to 'press on to full salvation', or, as George Tavard puts it so graphically, 'to present to the world a better image of the kingdom of God'. (24) The last report of the Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue, *The Word of Life*, stressed this aspect when it spoke memorably of the 'fruitfulness of faith' in terms of ever increasingly enriched styles of worship, service and devotion. (25)

In this context, and particularly when talking to this society, it is appropriate to invoke the 'marian' face of the Church. For Mary was blessed alike with obedience to the word of God and with vision. When she replied, 'Be it unto me according to Thy word', she had in mind not simply the present command of the Lord but the whole history of divine call and the response of her own people to it. When we are told that 'she kept all these things in her mind and pondered them', we think of her struggling with her own earthly and spiritual

pilgrimage, seeking to understand more fully and to have her own vision and understanding of God's purposes and Kingdom enlarged. Later, we hear of her waiting patiently for the gift of the Spirit with the other disciples and apostles. Finally, we have that vision of the woman 'clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet', a vision that Charles Wesley links to the eschatological destiny of the Church. (26) In this series of biblical cameos of the spiritual life of our Lady, we see reflected the form of spirituality appropriate to the whole process of ecumenical dialogue at every level, a spirituality marked by receptivity, attentiveness and vision. This is where surely we must all be, at whatever level of ecumenical activity or dialogue we may be involved in, receptive and attentive to our fellow Christians and open to the vision given by the Spirit.

References

1. *Ut Unum Sint*, CTS, 1995, para 21ff.
2. *Ibid*, paras 28, 32.
3. Reardon, M. *What on Earth is the Church for?*, British Council of Churches/CTS, 1986.
4. See Clark, A and Davey, C. *Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue - the work of the Preparatory Commission*, London, 1974.
5. Meyer, H and Vischer, L (eds) *Growth in Agreement*, pp. 367-88, for the Honolulu Roman Catholic-Methodist Report on the Holy Spirit.
6. *Ut Unum Sint*, paras 15-17.
7. Evans, M. (ed), *Mary, Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness*, 1995, Methodist Publishing House/CTS.
8. Shrewsbury, W. J. *An Essay on the Scriptural Character of the Wesleyan Methodist Economy*, London, 1840, pp. 89-90.
9. *Hymns and Psalms*, 1984, no. 374.
10. *The Gift of Authority* 1999, para 31.
11. For the question of Methodists and episcopacy, see *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-83*, Peterborough, 1984, pp. 202-37 and also the recent statement on episcopate and episcopacy, approved by the Methodist Conference of 2000, which will be published shortly by the Methodist Publishing House. For Anglican and Methodist statements on the Petrine ministry, see, respectively, *The Gift of Authority*, paras 60-3 and *Towards a Statement on the Church*, Lake Junaluska, 1986, para 58. The question has also been raised in Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue.
12. See the excellent discussion of this issue in the recent work of the French Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches*, ET, 1993.
13. Congar, Y. *Diversity and Communion*, ET, London, 1984, p. 151.
14. See the *Joint Declaration on Justification*, with commentary by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, 1997.
15. For the BEM Challenges, see Kinnamon, M. and Cope, Brian E. (eds) *The Ecumenical Movement, an Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, Geneva, 1997, p. 178.
16. Reardon, M. (ed.), *Called To be One*, London, 1996, p. 53.
17. *Ibid*, p. 55.
18. *Ibid*, p. 20.
19. *Ut Unum Sint*, para 79.
20. *The Apostolic Tradition*, Peterborough, 1991, paras 70ff.
21. *Gift of Authority*, paras 60-63.
22. *Ut Unum Sint*, paras 88-96.
23. Shrewsbury, op. cit. pp. 291, 296-304.
24. Tavard, G. *The Church, Community of Salvation*, Collegeville, 1992, p. 188.
25. *The Word of Life*, Lake Junaluska, 1996, paras 37-53.
26. Osborne, G. (ed.), *Poetical Works of J. and C. Wesley*, London, 1868, vol. 5, p. 228.