

The Ecumenical Margins

Society for Ecumenical Studies

St Martin-in-the-Bullring, Birmingham, 30 October 2004

Peripheral Vision: Is it People or Unity that is at the Edge?

*The Revd John O'Toole, Director of the Christian Education Centre,
Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark*

Originally I had planned to come and simply attend this conference. I thought I could stay comfortably at the margins, but now find myself centre stage. This may give us a clue to how we can reach out to those on the margins of church and society. I am speaking now because the Mark (Woodruff, secretary of the Society) asked me to. So personal invitation is key. Jesus didn't ask for volunteers; he invited people.

A priest-colleague of mine, when applying to go to the seminary, had to see his bishop up north. The bishop asked him if he had a favourite Gospel and when Paul said, "Yes; Matthew's", the bishop replied, "Wrong; it should be John." Not very fair! Luke is my favourite Gospel: it tells us of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and the Good Thief; or is it because it speaks of forgiveness or those on the margins? Also only Luke's Gospel has the story of Martha and Mary. Should we ask whether there are too many Marys and not enough Marthas in church today? We certainly need to ensure there is always balance. Otherwise, if one kind predominates, the other is pushed to one side. It is the same with women and men: both are called to equal discipleship. Luke applies the same thinking about balance, and the extremes that imbalance leads to, to the poor. His is the Gospel of Good News for the Poor. But who are the poor? Who are the people on the margins of the Church and society today? Mother Teresa spoke of the physical poverty of the East and the spiritual poverty of the West. From a Roman Catholic

perspective the people “on the margins” of the Church are the “lapsed” (resting) Catholics; the divorced and remarried; youth. We don’t seem to have the time, or the energy, to reach out to them - let alone the homeless, the mentally ill, refugees, the lonely, the unloved or whatever group we see as “the poor” in today’s society. So have we ever been on the margin of the Church or society ourselves, or any experience from which we can convincingly speak of it?

Let us look, then, at the experience of parish work. The priest is surrounded for most of the time by the faithful flock and its needs and objectives. Ploughing one’s own little furrow takes enough time and energy. In reality, it is ecumenism itself which is at the margins for most priests and parishes. How then can we speak of ecumenism among the denominations, when we have so little time and energy for offering unity in the Church for those who are “on the margins” of Church and society? How often do we even encounter those on the margins or, when we do, what is the quality of that encounter? Sister Ellen Flynn works at the Passage near Westminster Cathedral on behalf of the homeless. She speaks of the four legs of a chair to highlight the basic human needs of the people she meets:

1. Family and friends
2. Health
3. Income
4. A Place to live.

Those people who are broken in body, mind or spirit all have names. My uncle Tommy – went from being the smartest conductor and a happy marriage to string around a battered old brown case in a hostel for single homeless men in Arlington Road, Camden Town. Those on the margins all have names and stories. The Church, at its best, is ideally suited to meeting the person’s need by offering access to its life, inclusion and support through the experience of its very unity.

So it is not all bad news. There are some notable exceptions. Fr Michael Hollings had a great ministry to those who were vulnerable and on the margins and wrote a book, called *Living Priesthood*. Allegedly, one of his curates threatened to write another book, called *Living with Living Priesthood*, to argue another side of the case – the sheer costliness of this vision of the Church. The September 2004 edition of *Pastoral Exchange Review* caught my eye. It mentions a retreat given by Fr Jock Dalrymple. He asked a question that could rightly be asked of the members of all the Christian denominations: “Can you think of some text from the teachings of Christ that is being totally ignored by the Church and Christians today?” He had in mind Luke 14:12-14:

“When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not ask your friends, brothers, relations or rich neighbours, for fear they repay your courtesy by inviting you in return. No, when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; that they cannot pay you back means that you are fortunate, because repayment will be made to you when the virtuous rise again.”

This text seems to me to be absolutely central to Christians in search of the Church’s visible unity and the obligation not to ignore those at the margins and to look to them as a priority.

Have any of you read, or heard of, a document called *On The Threshold?* (Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2000). (Do we need a new report, *On The Margins?*). *On the Threshold* is based on those who make the first move and approach us (the “institutional Church”) for sacraments. It explores the tension between what people “want” and what we might perceive they “need”. The document encourages us to be positive in recognising that God is already active in these people’s lives and the address where they live – both physically and metaphorically. So it is about attitudes rather than programmes. It is thus important for us to bear in mind as we approach the margins and bring mainstream and margins together in an ecumenical spirit.

An earlier Roman Catholic document of 1998 is *Valuing Difference*. Its vision of is of including people with disabilities within the life and mission of the Church. Over the years, this particular pathway has been especially important to me, as I have weighed up the relation between unity and ecumenical work (as a member of the English ARC (Anglican-Roman Catholic Committee) and serving those left at the margins of the Church's concerns).

I had arrived to be parish priest of St Andrew's, Thornton Heath, on September 1, 1999. It is a large and vibrant parish. And you might say there are enough people and enough going on without seeking out those "on the margins" as well. As I said before, ecumenism itself is at the margins for most priests and people. There are very small numbers at any ecumenical meetings, partly because they tend to be deadly dull. One sign of hope was the ministers' fraternal. There were many ministers new to the area, and they were keen to meet as a support group. Then on November 28, the sword-attack took place in our church while many people were there for Sunday morning Mass. Help was immediately forthcoming from the Salvation Army captain, who offered the use of their citadel for the Sunday evening Mass. This was practical ecumenism. People had been seriously injured and the whole of the Catholic community felt very distressed. Our fellow Christians did much to reassure us that we were not alone and that the one Church is a place of healing and redemption.

Then there was the Nativity Play on Christmas Eve. It was not a Disability Play, but an opportunity for people of all abilities to work together - physical and mental disabilities included. Many parishioners remarked, "It makes my Christmas." It was also the making of us as the Church. For it was not a question of doing things FOR people with disabilities, but of doing things WITH them and allowing the gifts of those with disabilities to do something for us.

Then in 2000 I was approached by the diocese via Cristina Gangemi (note once more the personal invitation) and asked if St Andrew's would be one of the pilot parishes to try out a new programme called *Counting Everyone In*, to

build on our existing good practice. The programme was set up to raise awareness not only about toilets and ramps, but also about worship and sacramental preparation. We needed specialised help for both adults and children with severe learning disabilities. Cristina's experience here proved invaluable. Other gaps were highlighted. We realised that there are very few people with disabilities on most parish RCIA programmes (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). The pilot of the programme in our parish generated a certain interest and (good news for me) lay people took on the audit and fundraising to take it forward, thus removing these from the already overburdened clergy and giving lay people a larger stake in the Church's mission to those at the margins. Parishioners gained confidence, and a mum, whose teenage son has Down's Syndrome, ended up giving a talk to the priests and people of another deanery about the benefits of the programme.

Then, in September 2004, I took over as Director of the Christian Education Centre, which these days focuses on the priority of adult religious education and formation. *Counting Everyone In* is part of this wider brief. It makes me think, seeing how effective the training and transformation of lay people and parishes has been, how far do Christian denominations co-operate in the area of adult religious formation, and how much more could they do so with benefit? The *Counting Everyone In* Project has proved to be a very useful way in, to helping priests and people to look at the life of their parish generally in terms of welcome and inclusion. It is helping the archdiocese of Southwark to be more authentically ecumenical in respect of the people at its margins, and is surely something which can help all our partners in a similar way. And, in turn, united in this kind of outreach to include the poor, we would find ourselves that much more united in "practical ecumenism". Luke wrote not only the third Gospel but also the Acts of the Apostles, where his chief message is that the Risen Lord is the Lord of All Peoples. No one is excluded from the embrace of God's love and the Church is called to continue that embrace. We often fail (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) but it is ideal to strive for. St Luke is a good patron saint both for the marginalised and for the inclusive.