

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

BREAKING DOWN DIVIDING WALLS IN THE 21st CENTURY
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The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Ecumenical Movement So Far

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First of all, please allow me to express my gratitude to the Iona Community and to the Society of Ecumenical Studies and, in particular, to Dr. Martin Conway and to Revd. Murdoch MacKenzie for the privilege of being invited to spend this time with you in this holy place for a week devoted to seeking new ecumenical inspiration for the 21st Century. I have dreamed about coming here for many years, ever since, some thirty years ago, I enjoyed a wonderful book based upon a television series about Western Civilization prepared by Sir Kenneth Clark. That series and book not only opened my eyes to so many marvelous achievements in art and architecture, literature and music, but, its very first chapter, which bore the rather ominous title *The Skin of our Teeth*, had a tantalizing reference to Iona. Here St. Columba and his community found enough security to copy books, a noble human activity which, in Clark's estimation, was essential in preserving a link between the ancient cultures of the Greco-Roman world and the rebirth which occurred much later after many centuries of darkness. Clark commented: "I never come to Iona – and I used to come here almost every year when I was young – without the feeling that 'some God is in this place.' [...] Iona gives one more than anywhere else I know a sense of peace and inner freedom." Also, he

added, “for four centuries it was the center of Celtic Christianity.”¹ So if this place has played an important role in serving the transmission not only of culture but also of Christian faith in the past, it seems a most fitting setting to seek inspiration about such an important aspect of the life of the Church today as ecumenism.

Also I have looked forward to our being together here because I expect that this encounter will be quite different from the many dialogue and drafting meetings in which I have participated for nearly twenty years. Here, I suspect, we are not trying to come to agreement on some specific issue or to plan a response to some particular social development but rather to seek inspiration. I must admit to you frankly that I have not come here, as it were, to give to you some inspiration; the truth is, I am looking for it also myself. Hopefully, in this prayerful setting, the exchange of ideas of each and all of us can open our minds and hearts to the Holy Spirit in such a way that our listening and sharing can bring a graced increase beyond the sum of what each of us has brought here individually. That happens in multi- and bi-lateral dialogues too, but our theme invites us to what I hope will be an experience open to greater freshness and originality than what may occur in a dialogue session.

What I would like to do in what follows is offer what I consider to be some of the strengths and weaknesses of the ecumenical movement so far. I emphasize the fact that these are my own partial, limited reflections. I fully expect that others might list different strengths or weaknesses or might describe them in different ways. That is what I hope can be a benefit of our listening and talking together this week. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the ecumenical movement so far? Can we come up with a shared assessment of these? How do these strengths and weakness shed light on what may be done to break down dividing walls in the 21st Century?

Preliminary Presupposition

Before beginning my contribution to our response to such questions, a few preliminary remarks seem in order. First of all, it is important to recall the difficulty which attends the evaluation of recent history still in the process of

unfolding. At the end of the classic *A History of the Ecumenical Movement: 1517-1948*, produced by a team of scholars who had first-hand knowledge of that history, Bishop Stephen Charles Neill wrote:

Since this History is concerned with a movement which lives and daily grows, it is impossible to end this volume with a neat classification of lessons to be learned, or of causes of success and failure drawn up in trim categories. Such a conclusion would be false, since, however accurate in detail, the static impression it would leave would not correspond to the realities and the complexities of a living object.²

That comment remains pertinent today, almost fifty years later, as we try to describe the strengths and weaknesses of ecumenism in more recent decades. One of the values of our coming together in Iona is to improve our chances of a better reading by looking at the situation together and benefiting from one another's observations.

Secondly, it must be frankly admitted that many have voiced a certain note of disillusionment or disappointment when assessing ecumenism in recent years. This was apparent in all three of the major presentations at the Conference held in St. Albans Cathedral just two years ago, an event which provided some of the impetus leading to our present gathering at Iona. Archbishop Rowan Williams hinted at this malaise when he commented "... we need to balance the anxieties and challenges and struggles around unity with some sense that there is also an agenda for joy in this."³ Commenting upon the fact that Jesus prayed for unity in John 17, Reverend Elizabeth Welch noted: "It was as if he could already see how difficult it might be for his followers to be one and he knew that he needed to entrust the work of unity to his Father."⁴ But the most dour assessment came from Cardinal Walter Kasper, who stated:

After the first wave of enthusiasm, there is now much disenchantment at unfulfilled expectations. We still cannot gather together at the table of the Lord. Ecumenical progress became slow, with churches often

seeming to withdraw into old self-sufficient confessionalism. [...] Ecumenism seems to be in crisis.⁵

Cardinal Kasper did not thereby mean to offer merely a gloomy assessment of the present situation; he immediately added that a “crisis” may be taken also in a positive sense, as an opportunity for real progress. Already twenty years earlier one theologian ventured an explanation of the disappointment which some had felt even then, suggesting that the rapid steps toward changed relations between churches which took place from the mid-1960’s to the mid-1980’s had been prepared by a long process during the first half of the 20th Century. It was inevitable that after some rapid changes in relations a kind of standstill would set in, giving way to a slower phase in which divided churches would have to grow in mutual appreciation at a more profound level so as to arrive at real unity, not just what he called the “ecumenism of negotiation.” This latter is very useful and even necessary, he added, in preparing the way, but ultimately it is not able to produce that maturation into the reality of full communion which can never be accomplished simply by a document.⁶

Third, an interesting read of the last century of ecumenical activity was offered just a few years ago by veteran ecumenists Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C., Eamon McManus and Ann Riggs. In their *Introduction to Ecumenism*,⁷ they invited readers to consider the following evaluation of the unfolding of the ecumenical movement. A first stage lasted for roughly the first two-thirds of the 20th Century, during which the conviction that they had a duty to seek full unity became deeply rooted in the hearts of many Christians and structures for collaborating in various dimensions of work for unity – mission, education, social action, theological dialogue and so forth – were gradually put into place. A second stage comprising the last third of the century saw intense dialogue and the realization of much collaboration in the aforementioned arenas. Now a third stage of reception is beginning, during which the seeds produced during the previous phases will hopefully sink in to good soil in the lives of the churches which, in turn, will gradually take appropriate steps toward increasing their visible unity. Perhaps such a schema may have appeal for some of us here or, even if not, perhaps it could prove as a useful foil for developing a different evaluation.

Finally, I have been asked to reflect upon are the strengths and weaknesses of the ecumenical movement so far. Strengths and weaknesses seem less to have the nature of events but more the nature of qualities or characteristics. In what follows, I will try not only to name or describe particular qualities of the ecumenical movement, but also to suggest, when it seems possible, how strengths may be enhanced and how weaknesses may be overcome.

Strengths

1. I believe that the first and one of the greatest strengths of the ecumenical movement is the fact that it began and continues in being on the firm foundation of wanting to discern and carry out God's will for the Church. This is one of the greatest values of ecumenism, because, as such, it expresses discipleship to Jesus. Jesus himself sought to do the will of the Father. Disciples learn from him, as they learned to pray in the prayer he taught them "Thy will be done", a prayer echoed later in his acceptance of the Father's will in the garden of Gethsemane. As Christians commenting on the Lord's Prayer over the centuries have from time to time pointed out, God's will inevitably shall be accomplished. Among many passages, 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 is a particularly good example of unshakable Christian hope that, in the end, Christ shall triumphantly hand over the kingdom to the Father and God will be all in all. To the extent that the ecumenical movement seeks to do the will of the Father, it cannot ultimately fail. God's will shall be done; this is the best reason for resisting discouragement in the face of the fact that we are still divided in many ways even after so much effort. It is the best reason for continuing to strive for the unity for which Christ prayed, even if we are sometimes weary. This centering of the ecumenical movement upon the will of God was put in a slightly different way, emphasizing the aspect of obedience, by the 1982 Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Conversation:

Christ's will and prayer are that his disciples should be one. Those who have received the same word of God and have been baptized in the same Spirit cannot, without disobedience, acquiesce in a state of

separation. Unity is of the essence of the Church, and since the Church is visible its unity must also be visible.⁸

If this is so, then we can adopt an attitude of confidence and steadfastness in continuing our efforts, no matter what obstacles seem to arise or how long the road ahead still seems.

2. A second strength lay in the vast extent of the spread of the ecumenical spirit among so many people within so many different Christian communities. Bishop Stephen Neill, writing a half century after the famous World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh began the modern ecumenical movement with the clear and determined statement “we will stay together,” wrote: “what has happened in these fifty years must needs seem astonishing. [...] Things which are taken for granted today were certainly not taken for granted a generation ago. [...] ... things which today seem incredible or impossible will seem plain and obvious to our children....”⁹ Ecumenism has become deeply engrained in the life of the churches. A recent assessment was offered in the second chapter of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter on ecumenism. It recalls some of the positive steps taken toward greater unity in recent decades:

It is the first time in history that efforts on behalf of Christian unity have taken on such great proportions and have become so extensive. This is truly an immense gift of God, one which deserves all our gratitude. From the fullness of Christ we receive ‘grace upon grace’ (*Jn* 1:16). An appreciation of how much God has already given is the condition which disposes us to receive those gifts still indispensable for bringing to completion the ecumenical work of unity. An overall view of the last thirty years enables us better to appreciate many of the fruits of this common conversion to the Gospel which the Spirit of God has brought about by means of the ecumenical movement.¹⁰

A strength is that this movement is inspired by the Spirit and has touched the hearts of so many individuals and communities.

3. A third strength is what I would call the multi-dimensionality of the ecumenical movement. It has penetrated so many important aspects of the life of the Church. This is best illustrated by looking at the unfolding history of the efforts toward greater unity in the 20th Century. Many Christians who know something of that story, when they hear the name Edinburgh coupled with the year 1910, think immediately of relation of ecumenism to mission and evangelization. The same can be said for the great conference of Stockholm in 1925, which emphasized the importance of ecumenism for the promotion of justice and peace, and for that of Lausanne in 1927, which underlined the significance of faith and Church order for unity. Mention of other cities and years, along with the names of many outstanding Christians who were protagonists of the movement toward unity, would show how many facets of our ecclesial life ecumenism has touched:

- the prayer life and spirituality of so many individuals and communities;
- the work of translating together the Scriptures into many different languages so as to make God's word available to people in their native tongues;
- the various ways of cooperation in fostering of health and education by Christian individuals and organizations;
- the establishment of structures within our respective communities and of councils of churches so as to "institutionalize" ecumenism, giving it a staying power and initiative;
- the entrance of ecumenical topics and motivation in our programmes of Christian formation and catechesis, helping all Christians to see one another not as enemies but as brothers and sisters on the basis of our common baptism;
- and the training and education of ministers, theologians and Church leaders so that those playing important roles of service within our communities will be concerned to seek the unity for which Christ prayed.

A great strength of the ecumenical movement lay in the fact that it does not concern one isolated aspect of ecclesial life, of interest only to a small group of specialists.

4. A fourth strength pertains especially to that aspect of the ecumenical movement seeking to address the issues that caused our divisions in the first place. It concerns more particularly the question of doctrinal and structural reconciliation. I am convinced that we are gradually gaining the ability of placing some of the oppositions of the past into a broader context, which allows us to see them now as false oppositions. One example might be that tension between the Orthodox and Catholics, on the one side, who tend to have an aversion to speak of the “sinfulness of the Church” because the Church is Christ’s Bride and is professed to be holy in the creed, and many Protestants, on the other side, who tend to be very aware of the shortcomings of the Church and its leaders and who emphasize that the Church must always be reformed. The new ecclesiology study that is being developed by the Faith and Order Commission, in my estimation, has the potential to help Christians see this as a false opposition. Its first two chapters, which describe the Church in terms of its relation to the salvific work of God and its vulnerability during its pilgrimage through history to the weaknesses caused by sin, allow one to see that when some Christians are reluctant to call the Church a sinner, they do not thereby deny the need for continual reform. Similarly those who prophetically denounce sin within our communities in no way intend to deny what Ephesians teaches about Christ’s spotless bride or what the creed professes about the real holiness of the Church.

Another classic tension was described in Reformed-Roman Catholic agreed text entitled *Toward a Common Understanding of the Church*, which explained how Reformed Christians tend to see the Church as centered upon the word, while Catholics tend to see the Church as centered upon the sacraments.¹¹ In fact, both word and sacrament depend upon one another. Different churches may give different emphases to one or the other; but it would not make sense to oppose them, as if one had to choose and settle for one without the other.

Similarly, the development of scientific biblical exegesis has shown that Scripture cannot simply be opposed to Tradition, a point forcefully brought home in the famous statement about tradition by the Faith and Order Commission at Montreal in 1963.¹² To the extent that tradition can be understood as the handing on of the message and life of Christ, that text affirmed that we would not be Christians at all were it not for the tradition. Montreal's statement has more recently been further developed in the Faith and Order paper on ecumenical hermeneutics of 1998: *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, which especially tries to explore how our various cultures and ecclesial histories affect our interpretation. The text also goes into the issues surrounding the discernment of which interpretations are more or less adequate, a discernment engaging the whole community – scholars, authoritative ministers and the whole people of God.¹³

Finally, the Lutheran-Catholic joint declaration on justification of 1999 illustrates well the principle of looking at past contradictory formulations of faith within a new and broader context. The declaration states: "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."¹⁴ On the basis of this and several other fundamental shared affirmations, the two communities go on to show how they explain this central gospel truth about justification from different mindsets and using different terminologies, each of which are compatible with the fundamental agreement. A great strength of the ecumenical movement is this development toward what has been called "differentiated consensus," that is, the ability to formulate a common understanding of the gospel which allows for diversity in explanation.

Thus, in summary, four strengths of the ecumenical movement are its rootedness in the search for the will of God, its extensive penetration into the life of the church, its pervasiveness in many diverse aspects of that life and its ability to overcome false oppositions by placing former conflicts within a broader context and re-evaluating them in light of a common return to the sources of faith. Of course, each of these can be further strengthened. And others might be added. What other strengths would you add?

Weaknesses

1. A first weakness may be gleaned from the fact that after so many years – we will be celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh in only five years – we still are not united. In my preliminary remarks I noted the sense of malaise that many have expressed. In a way, this reflects the greatest weakness which we suffer in the pilgrimage toward the unity for which Jesus prayed, that is, that it is impossible for us to achieve it on our own. We simply cannot do it. This is an ontological weakness. But, on the other hand, if it is true that we are saved by grace, that our salvation is not a human achievement, why should we think that the reestablishment of full unity in the Church is something “in our hands,” so to say?

The most difficult problem for Church unity seems to be unity in faith. Many documents have been produced; many agreements recorded, along with areas in which disagreement still exists. In the *Proceedings of the Conference held in St. Albans Cathedral on 17 May 2003*, a booklet I believe we all received from the planners of our present meeting, there was a striking comment by Cardinal Kasper which, I confess, made me laugh out loud as soon as I read it. In addition to the danger of making ecumenism a “mere academic affair,” he added:

There is another danger too: to embark upon a mere ecumenical activism involving an endless series of conferences, symposiums, commissions, meetings, sessions, projects and spectacular events with the perpetual repetition of the same arguments, concerns, problems and lamentations. It may be useful to bear in mind that the ecumenical documents of only the last decades at the international level, leaving aside the many regional and local documents, now comprise two thick volumes. Who can read all this stuff, and, indeed, who wants to? Most of this documentation is not really received in the churches, neither at the hierarchical nor at the grassroots level. Often it is destined only for the bookshelves, and I can well understand lay people who

disappointedly ask: What and where are the concrete results, and what is the visible outcome of your illuminated discussions and documents?¹⁵

Last November, in a ceremony at St. George's cathedral in the Phanar marking the return to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople the relics of two great bishops of that same patriarchal diocese – Gregory Nazianzen and John Chrysostom – Patriarch Bartholomew commented on Gregory's role in bringing about doctrinal agreement at the time of the second ecumenical council in 381. He then added:

But ecclesiastical unity must be considered and experienced more profoundly than the said agreement, i.e., ontologically, as unity of persons, personal feelings, personal wills, personal goals and objectives and not as a mere organizational or administrative union, or as a coincidence of opinions and convictions or as a simple agreement on the formulation and intellectual conceptualization of truths or of truth as a whole. A doctrinal and intellectual agreement certainly helps, and can smooth the path and lead toward unity, but it is not in itself the end, it is not unity. The "unity of the acknowledgment of the Son of God" spoken about by the Apostle is the communion of an ontological nature with the Christ in Whom alone may unity be achieved.¹⁶

The point is that agreements are not enough. We should not expect the unity of the Church to be the result of a series of negotiations, something like we have witnessed in recent weeks as the whole world watched various officials in Iraq try to draft a new constitution for their country. Archbishop Rowan Williams in his St. Albans address wrote:

In those farewell discourses in St. John's gospel, unity appears as a function of the fact that believers are drawn into Jesus' own relation with God the Father, and Jesus' own movement, his eternal movement into the depths of God the Father. Unity is what we call that harmonious movement into the Father which is the life of Jesus in eternity and in time. [...] Unity is therefore never simply the

appearance of unanimity, it is never simply a matter of human agreement.¹⁷

As such, the ecumenical movement is too weak to produce unity; it cannot do so by texts or by joint witness for justice, peace and the protection of the environment, nor by collaboration in works of charity, as much as all of those activities may contribute and hasten the day on which this unity in grace is more deeply found. But this great weakness could be considered a strength if we take into account Paul's conviction – “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). This first great “weakness” suggests not abandoning the various dimensions of promoting unity, but rather reinforcing them as much as possible with what might be called an “ecumenical spirituality,” emphasizing especially the need for and value of prayer. This idea was also prominent in the contributions of all three of the principal St. Albans speakers.

2. A second weakness is the separation and even competition between the various kinds of activity promoting Christian unity. Nils Ehrenström closed his account of the Life and Work movement, that is, the movement which sought to promote unity by common witness for justice and peace, with the following words, which I find to be especially helpful:

It has been perhaps inevitable, but none the less a grave disadvantage to the ecumenical movement, that the various aspects of ecumenical concern – the unity and renewal of the Church, the evangelistic task among peoples who have never known Christ or have rejected him in the dim and distorted form in which he has been presented by the Churches, the social and political witness of the Churches – have been developed in separation from one another. Progress toward integration has been made, but the process is as yet very far from complete.¹⁸

In recent years, such projects as the series of studies initiated with *Costly Unity*¹⁹ (1993) within the World Council of Churches or the more recent *Princeton Proposal*²⁰ (2003) continue to show this weakness and even tension between various streams of the ecumenical movement. Given the limited resources available to the ecumenical movement and to the churches in

general, some ask: “what is the best way of using our limited funds?” Surely the mission of the Church in the world must impel Christians to reach out together to those suffering. Often in ecumenical dialogue about theological issues, participants, especially from countries that are economically poorer or suffering from catastrophic scourges like the AIDS pandemic, wonder why attention is given to solving those problems which first divided the churches many centuries ago. The urgency of people suffering suggests setting aside theological questions, which seem so resistant to resolution in any case. On the other hand, as the Princeton Statement argues, cogently in my view, that no progress toward full unity can be expected by ignoring or simply by-passing the contradictions which logically led our forebears to discern that they had to part ways.

The current phase of Reformed-Catholic international dialogue offers perhaps a way forward. As the discussions unfolded from 1998, it became clear that there was a tension between those who wanted to focus upon “contextual” issues, that is, the social situations which Reformed and Roman Catholics face in their different contexts throughout the world, on the one hand, and those who did not want to abandon the “classical issues” which divided our communities from the time of the 16th Century. After some arm-wrestling, we attempted to blend the two concerns, looking at stories of common witness within the contexts of South Africa, Northern Ireland and Canada, not only to learn about how our fellow Reformed and Catholic brothers and sisters had or had not collaborated and what could be learned from this experience but also to explore ecclesiological issues pertinent to these experiences, especially looking to our roots in Scripture and Tradition to reflect upon what the doctrine about the Church’s relation to the Kingdom of God mandates concerning social action by Christians. The question of Church ministry and authority also entered into this discussion of questions stemming from the contextual experience of our brothers and sisters. It seems to me that we should not opt for one or the other kind of ecumenical engagement. We need to maintain an integrated understanding of the many dimensions of ecumenical activity.

I have illustrated this weakness with examples which highlight a certain competition between common efforts promoting justice, peace and the

integrity of creation, on the one hand, and theological ecumenism, which seeks to overcome past contradictory positions concerning faith and order, on the other. But fitting under this particular weakness should also be listed new challenges for the ecumenical movement which could emerge in light of the massive growth of secularism in some parts of the world, as well as the increased awareness of religious pluralism. Today there is a temptation to question the continuing relevance of seeking Christian unity, when the tasks of presenting the Gospel in a credible way before our secular societies or of engaging in meaningful inter-religious dialogue with representatives of world religions seem so pressing. We need to resist the possibility that these real challenges stemming from our contemporary situation will deflect us from continuing that work needed to pursue the unity Christ wills.

3. Perhaps the most decisive weakness of the ecumenical movement derives from our lack of agreement about the nature and mission of the Church. There is even disagreement about whether or how much we need to agree about the nature and mission of the Church. I find Cardinal Kasper's description of this problem very helpful:

We are dealing with diverse ecclesiologies that lead to different conceptions of the same ecumenical goal to which we strive. In turn, these conceptions raise different expectations that, by their very nature, lead to disappointment on the part of one or the other of the partners due to the very fact that one is not responding to the other's expectations, or cannot respond due to a different concept of the ecumenical goal. Such a situation has led in part to a sort of stalemate that makes substantial progress impossible, at least until the questions relating to ecclesiology have been fundamentally resolved.²¹

A "stalemate that makes substantial progress impossible"? We can find such words less discouraging, if what I said earlier about the overall impossibility of achieving unity on our own is true. But, in addition, it seems to me that there are several important openings that promise fuller agreement about the nature and mission of the Church. I already mentioned briefly the new work by the Faith and Order Commission on this theme. At the heart of its latest draft,

which will be presented to the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre next February (2006), is the biblical and patristic notion of communion, a way of thinking about the Church which was also precious both to the Eastern churches and to many of the leaders of the Reformation. The ecclesiology of communion has deeply characterized many bi-lateral dialogues during the past fifteen years and, as such, is becoming more widely spread among Christians of many different communities. One may hope that the four chapters of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, which treat the Church in relation to God, to history, to the essential elements of its life and to the world, may provide a clear and relatively simple instrument for achieving greater convergence and consensus.

Furthermore – and this is the reason why I was so bold as to suggest one of my own books as a reading for our meeting here in Iona – after a good number of years teaching ecclesiology I have come to think that the church can be seen as comprised of people engaged in three fundamental activities: believing in Christ, celebrating the new life they have received in Christ and serving one another and all of their fellow human beings after the example of Christ.²² I believe that there have been significant convergences between divided Christians in each of these three areas. I have already mentioned important advances concerning scripture and tradition and justification, which I believe provide a firm foundation for unity in the first of these three activities – believing. Regarding the celebration of the new life in Christ, the question of the sacraments emerges as a natural theme for dialogue. I believe that there has been significant convergence in this area, as two new studies on baptism – one by Faith and Order and the other by the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches – show.²³ For example, both texts try to broaden the context around the traditional opposition expressed by the fact that some Christians call baptism a “sacrament” while others call it an “ordinance.” Even more, two earlier studies – the Lutheran-Catholic *Facing Unity* of 1984 and the Methodist-Catholic *The Word of Life* of 1996 – looked at the question of the nature and number of sacraments, agreeing that they are means used by God for the sanctification of God’s people.²⁴ These dialogues also point out that, while Lutherans and Methodists designate only two rites with the precise word “sacrament,”

nevertheless, those other liturgical actions which Orthodox and Catholics call sacraments are also celebrated in many Lutheran or Methodist communities: confirmation, reconciliation, marriage, ordination and even anointing of the sick. Perhaps more churches would be able to say the same. Regarding the third area of my triad – that of serving one another and their fellow human beings – there have been important steps forward, such as recognizing that all members of the Church, laity and clergy, are called to a life of service, that ordained ministry must be seen primarily in terms of service and that the life of most Christian communities gives evidence of the need for and exercise of a ministry of oversight, which has been referred to in any number of dialogues with the Greek word *episkope*. Under the heading of service can come also the extensive agreement and cooperation between Christians of different communities in matters of proclaiming the Gospel and of promoting justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

Conflicting views of the Church still constitute a weakness for the ecumenical movement. But, as I have tried to argue, this topic has been fruitfully explored and there are reasons to hope that the miracle of sharing a common mind is more possible than we may once have imagined.

At least three other weaknesses should be listed, even though briefly.

4. A fourth one concerns the lack of participation within the ecumenical movement as a whole of many of the largest and seemingly most quickly growing newer churches. Most of these are in the Pentecostal family of churches, which will be celebrating a major anniversary next year in 2006 – the hundredth anniversary of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Asuza Street mission in Los Angeles, to which many of these communities look as a significant moment in their own origin. Another large block of churches are those called evangelical. Interestingly, in both cases there have been contacts and developments, some more recent, but some stemming back already for more than thirty years, such as the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic international dialogue. Since the year 2000, several meetings of leaders from Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have taken place with representatives

of those churches who have been more engaged in the ecumenical movement in what has been called the “Global Christian Forum.”²⁵

5. Fifth, there is the problem of reception. How have the results of the ecumenical movement been received into the lives of the various churches? Much has been published on the question of ecumenical reception.²⁶ One of the most wise observations, in my view, is that the aim of dialogue and collaboration is not the reception of texts but the reception by the churches of one another. Texts are important, even essential, as steps along the way to this more profound existential reception. Many have pointed out that the process of discovering, discerning and acknowledging the various kinds of unity that already exist and that are considerable is one that takes a long time. If the aim be a deep rather than superficial growth in communion, then it would be best to emphasize formation. Commenting on Oscar Cullman’s book *Unity through Diversity*, Joseph Ratzinger wrote in 1986:

What I find very helpful for this question is the slogan that Oscar Cullmann recently injected into the debate: unity through diversity. True, schism belongs to what is evil, especially when it leads to hostility and to the impoverishment of the Christian witness. But when the poison of hostility is slowly extracted from the schism and when as a result of mutual acceptance what emerges from the difference is no longer just impoverishment but a new wealth of listening and understanding, then it can be in transition towards being seen as a *felix culpa* even before it is completely healed. [...] But this means that, even if schisms are to begin with the failure of men and women and their fault, nevertheless there is in them a dimension that corresponds to God’s disposing. Hence it is only to a certain point that we can repair them through repentance and conversion; but it is only the God who judges and forgives who decides entirely on his own when the point is reached that we no longer need this split....²⁷

This, he claims, is not a concept of stagnation and resignation to divisions. Rather, “it is quite simply the attempt to leave to God what is his business alone and to discover what then in all seriousness are our tasks.”²⁸ The

weakness of insufficient reception can be countered by renewed efforts to provide believers in our various churches with an ecumenical formation and spirituality which hopefully will bear fruit in more profound appreciation of and communion with one another across confessional lines.

6. A sixth weakness of the ecumenical movement is the ever-present danger of the emergence of new sources of division, which arise from ways in which the changes of contemporary society have an impact on our discernment about such areas as Church order (here, for example, one might mention, the disagreement about the ordination of women) or ethics (examples include the moral evaluation of abortion, homosexuality, the regulation of birth, genetic engineering and so forth). These, of course, are issues which were not the causes of our divisions. Nor are disagreements about them matters between churches – the internal unity of our communities is challenged by these new questions. I would simply comment that here we see the inevitability of understanding the Church as a community of believers on the move in a pilgrimage through history.²⁹ As such new questions of faith and morals will always have to be addressed in the course of time and the Church will forever have to be a community of dialogue, even after, God-willing, some or all of the current divisions are healed.

Thus one can list at least six weaknesses of the ecumenical movement: the impossibility of arriving at unity from human effort alone, the competition between the various streams of ecumenical activity, the lack of common vision about the Church and its mission, the absence of some of the larger and more growing communities from the ecumenical movement, the lack of reception into the lives of the churches of ecumenical achievements and the emergence of new Church-dividing issues. At the same time, the foregoing pages suggest ways for seeing some of these weaknesses in a new light or of overcoming them.

Conclusion

Looking at these weaknesses together with the four strengths earlier mentioned – search for the will of God, the wide diffusion of ecumenism, its

presence in so many aspects of ecclesial life and the growing ability to overcome false oppositions – we may be led to ask at the conclusion: what is needed in the present situation? Where can we go from here?

It seems obvious to say that we are in an intermediate stage on the road from hostility to full communion. We need to give shape to this intermediate stage by exploring ways to increase our knowledge of one another and our collaboration together in carrying out the mission Christ has entrusted to us. In November, 2004, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity held a symposium outside of Rome inviting the ecumenical officers of all the episcopal conferences in the Catholic Church to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Decree on Ecumenism, published by the Second Vatican Council in 1964. In addition to various talks from ecumenical leaders from various churches, the symposium proposed for the comments of the participants a draft for what was entitled a *Vademecum oecumenicum* or ecumenical handbook. Its aim would be to provide numerous suggestions that pastors and ecumenical officers in the various episcopal conferences of the Catholic Church might offer to their people as ways of growing in an ecumenical spirituality. The handbook has three sections. The first, entitled *Listening to and Proclaiming the Word of God* proposed various ways of collaborating with one another in reading and studying the Scriptures, getting to know one another's histories and heroes, catechisms and hymns, drawing more practical consequences from our mutual recognition of baptism and cooperating with one another in various forms of ecumenical formation and study. A second section – *Celebrating our Common Faith* – suggested ways that Catholic liturgical and prayer celebrations could incorporate ecumenical themes more frequently and more effectively and produced lists of many different kinds of common prayer services as well as of various occasions during the year which might provide opportunities for Christians to pray together. The third section, entitled *Living the Faith at the Personal and Community Level* suggested a host of personal practices, encounters between groups from different churches, and pastoral and charitable services which Christians could perform together.

The point of this ecumenical handbook would be to encourage the development of a spirituality of communion which may foster a strengthening of the desire for unity among Christians. This ecumenical spirituality can build upon what has been already going on for decades, deepening it and extending it to a greater number of people. This is not to replace the continuing commitment to theological dialogue and to common witness to the gospel and common advocacy of justice, peace and a healthy environment. But perhaps it can gradually create a new climate in which what Patriarch Bartholomew called the ontological reality of communion grows among us. The ecumenical movement need not worry so much about the setting of artificial deadlines. Rather it is a question of patient, persistent and prayerful seeking of that unity which God wills, in the way and at the time that God wills it. By continuing to deepen our friendship, collaboration and common witness, we may hope that miraculous breakthroughs may yet occur through the surprising grace of the Holy Spirit.

Br. Roger Schutz, founder of the Taizé community, who was so tragically killed several weeks ago, believed that the road to reconciliation begins with each person. He described his own experience as follows: “I have found my Christian identity by reconciling within myself the faith of my origins with the Mystery of the Catholic and Orthodox Faith.” A testimony about ecumenical spirituality sent from the Taizé community included the following words:

Communion is born from within, in the heart of hearts of each person, in silence and in love. The ecumenical vocation has its source in a desire for communion that touches the depths of the soul. When it is lived out within the human person, reconciliation gains credibility and can lead to a spirit of reconciliation in that communion of love which is the Church. In the history of Christians down through the ages, one day multitudes discovered that they were divided, without even knowing why. Today it is essential for a reversal to take place, so that multitudes of Christians can discover that they are in communion.³⁰

Breaking Down Dividing Walls in the 21st Century was chosen as the title of our week together here at Iona. Last year, at a celebration in South Africa on

the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic joint declaration on justification, Cardinal Kasper ended his talk with a note of hopeful optimism which resonates so well with our title this week.³¹ Who could have imagined walking by the Berlin wall on the morning of November 9, 1989, that that very evening the wall would begin to be torn down? Why could we not hope that, doing our best to respond to the grace already at work within us, God's power might amazingly break down what now at times seem insurmountable walls. So may it be.

Notes

¹ Kenneth Clark, *Civilization: A Personal View*, New York 1969, 9-10.

² Stephen Charles Neill (with the help of an Editorial Group), "Epilogue," in: Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, ed., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, Philadelphia 1954, 726.

³ In *May they all be one ... but how? A vision of Christian unity for the next generation*, n.p. 2003, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ These ideas were expressed by Joseph Ratzinger in his essay "The Progress of Ecumenism," reprinted in his *Church, Ecumenism & Politics*, Middlegreen 1988, 135-142.

⁷ New York/Mahwah, N.J. 1998.

⁸ From paragraph 9 of the "Introduction" to the Final Report, in Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, ed., *Growth in Agreement*, "Faith and Order Paper No. 108," Geneva 1984, 66-67.

⁹ "Epilogue," in: *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, 730-731.

¹⁰ *Ut unum sint*, 41.

¹¹ See paragraphs 94-113, entitled "Two conceptions of the Church," of *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church*, printed in J. Gros, H. Meyer and W. G. Rusch, ed., *Growth in Agreement II*, Geneva 2000, "Faith and Order Paper no. 187," 801-805.

¹² Some of the more salient passages of Montreal's "Scripture, Tradition and traditions," are reprinted in G. Gassmann, ed., *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, Geneva 1993, "Faith and Order Paper No. 159," 10-18.

¹³ This text was published as a separate "Faith and Order Paper" by the World Council of Churches publishing house in Geneva in 1998. Later it appeared in *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics*, P. Bouteneff & D. Heller, ed., Geneva 2001, "Faith and Order Paper no. 189," 134-160; it is also available on the internet at www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/treasure.html.

¹⁴ Reprinted in *Growth in Agreement II*, 568-569.

¹⁵ In *May they all be one ... but how?*, 22.

¹⁶ The Ecumenical Patriarch's discourse is printed in The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Information Service*, n. 117 (2004/IV), 151.

¹⁷ In *May they all be one ... but how?*, 5.

¹⁸ "Movements for International Friendship and Life and Work 1910-1925" and "...1925-1948," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, 509-596 at 596.

¹⁹ *Costly Unity: A World Council of Churches Consultation on Koinonia and Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*, Geneva 1993.

²⁰ C. Braaten & R. Jensen, ed., *In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*, Grand Rapids 2003.

²¹ "Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity: Introductory Report of the President, Cardinal Walter Kasper," *Information Service*, N. 115 (2004/I-II), 28.

²² This way of thinking about the life of the Christian community is developed in W. Henn, *Church: The People of God*, London/New York 2004.

²³ The Faith and Order study was discussed at the plenary meeting of that commission, held in Kuala Lumpur in the summer of 2004 and again at the standing commission meeting in Crete in June of 2005. While a finished text has not yet been published, one can read of the plenary commission discussion in Thomas F. Best, ed., *Faith and Order at the Crossroads. Kuala Lumpur 2004. The Plenary Commission Meeting*, Geneva 2005, "Faith and Order Paper No. 196," 111-158. The Joint Working Group's "Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism," is published in *Information Service*, N. 117 (2004/IV) 188-204.

²⁴ See paragraphs 75-82 of *Facing Unity*, entitled "Increasing agreement in understanding and celebration of the sacraments," printed in *Growth in Agreement II*, 461-463, and paragraphs 100-107 of *The Word of Life*, entitled "The sacraments and other means of grace," printed in *Ibid.*, 639-641.

²⁵ A brief account of the Global Christian Forum can be found in "The Eighth Report of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches: From 1999-2005," in *Information Service*, N. 117 (2004/IV) 171-172.

²⁶ For an overview of this literature, see W. Henn, "The Reception of Ecumenical Documents," in H. Legrand, J. Manzanares and A. García y García, ed., *Reception and Communion Among Churches*, Washington, D.C. 1997 [first published as *The Jurist* 57, 1977, No. 1], 362-395, with a response by Mary Tanner on pages 396-404.

²⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism & Politics*, 138-139; the "need" is a reference to St. Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 11:19 that "there must be factions."

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁹ I have attempted to expound a dynamic vision of unity in faith in *One Faith: Biblical and Patristic Contributions toward Understanding Unity in Faith*, New York/Mahwah, N.J. 1995.

³⁰ Typed document sent to the Plenary Session 2003 of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, dossier entitled "Testimonies: *Ecumenical Spirituality lived and experienced*, pages 2-3.

³¹ Printed in *Information Service*, N. 117 (2004/IV), 160.