

## **The Society for Ecumenical Studies**

# **Sharing Communion in a Hungry World**

Report of the Conference for National and County Ecumenical Officers – Churches Together in England, St Katherine's, Parmoor, 3-7 October 2005

***Hilary Martin***

This conference took the form of a varied and enlightening week on the subject of the Eucharist with the aim of addressing the divisions that exist and contemplating ways forward to a greater unity. There were times of prayer and celebrations of the Eucharist in the URC, Methodist and Anglican traditions. There were visits to several places of worship and we were privileged to be addressed by eminent Christian leaders through whom our understanding of the Eucharist in different traditions was greatly enhanced.

## **Keynote Addresses**

### **Eucharist in a Hungry World (1): *Inderjit Bhogal***

As a former Sikh and a Methodist minister, Inderjit declared his fascination with Eucharist. Years ago, the absence of a Sikh temple in the place in which he had taken up residence drove him to the nearest centre of worship where he was moved by the story of Jesus eating with those with whom others would not eat. Subsequently, he was drawn into the Eucharistic Church which, he feels, resonates with the Sikh tradition of sharing food, hospitality and fellowship. After the tsunami, he returned to Sri Lanka with a Tamil colleague, now also a Methodist, and they celebrated a "Eucharist" in the ruins of the friend's family home, in which his relatives had perished. The broken coconut they used was, to him, a powerful symbol of the life and example of Jesus in a broken world. His experience of Kenya was one of

plenteousness of food but food which was destined for export to richer nations. The workers suffered sickness from malaria due to the stagnant water in which the rice grows. He pointed out that the tiny piece of food and sip of liquid that we receive at the Eucharist are significant to the hungry. Some people live on 60p per day, less than half that spent per head on cattle in the EU. Indergit went on to highlight the reality of inequality, the suffering of the poor compared with the opulence and frequent indifference of the developed world. All humans are sacred and bear the image of God and the one path to God needs to be seen as God's one path to us. This, to Indergit, is the start of our thinking of Christ's Eucharist. We see in Jesus' ministry of hospitality, God's outward reach to us through food: the Bread of Life. This cuts through the barriers that separate us and embraces the outcasts and sinners. He warned of the Church becoming locked up in its own community with no real connection with the poor or those inspired with Jesus as the one who showed us His way of sacrifice and service: Jesus ate with the poor but we do not. He believes that Holy Communion should nurture within us an anger over the injustice of the world and the will to overcome it and that the buying patterns, greed and self-indulgence of our lifestyles need to be tackled by a change in the rules of trade. The real weapons of mass destruction, to him, are hunger, poverty and malnutrition. In a Sikh temple the order is "first we eat then we meet". The worship contains a sacrament of shared eating, with no privilege afforded to anyone in the preparing, serving and eating of the shared meal. To Indergit, this is the incarnation of which the Gospel speaks.

### **Eucharist as Event: *Vincent Nichols***

Vincent gave us a Catholic perspective on the Mass. He stated that his own appreciation and understanding of the Eucharist had changed and developed with time and that his thinking had been enriched by ecumenical dialogue. He had gained a deepened sense of importance of the Liturgy of the Word. As a student, he had been impressed by the care taken in URC preaching. Every celebration of the Eucharist is an event of God's grace and also a Trinitarian event, involving the working of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Vincent saw the Eucharist as event in five different ways.

1. Historical. There are links with the life of Christ on Earth, the Last Supper and Calvary. Through the Holy Spirit, there is a making present of something which went before. The feast of the Atonement, the Jewish tradition of Passover, is made present as the point between Israel's wandering to their arrival in the Promised Land. Through the Lamb of God, the altar of sacrifice becomes the table of our banquet.
2. Cosmic. The focus here is on Christ as the Eternal Word and His significance in the whole of cosmic history. Through Him we are reconciled to God. In the person of Christ in the Eucharistic event, the spiritual life of the whole human family is renewed. Through Him the deepest law of our human nature is revealed: God goes right to the heart of who we are and what we may become.
3. Ecclesial. It is the Eucharist that makes the Church. The priest lends his hands and voice to Christ and, through Holy Orders, there is a guarantee that what is done is effective. The Eucharist creates community through the power of Christ. It is an event of transformation: from death to resurrection, from sin to grace, from ourselves as we are to that which we may become through the transformation of bread and wine to Christ's body and blood
4. Community. It defines the Church's ecclesiology and mission.
5. Lasting. The transformation from sin to grace is permanent. The giving of Christ for us remains with us ("I will be with you always") as an abiding sacramental presence.

Vincent affirmed the Eucharist as the root of Catholic sacramental theology. He recognised that the Church, in protecting this, may be seen to be preoccupied with its outward visibility and perceived as having "hard edges". However, he affirmed the RC belief in a particular and unchanging understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist. This, he proposed,

stands against a Post-Modernist attitude, which fragments the theology of the Eucharist further by recognising a multitude of individual perceptions.

### **Eucharist in a Hungry World (2): *Indergit Bhogal***

Indergit welcomed much of what Vincent had said. He went on to present the doctrinal emphases that lie at the heart of Methodism. There is recognition of a prevenient grace for all of us. All may be saved. There is inclusiveness in Methodism which desires all to feast at the table, not just an inner circle. In a diverse world, it is necessary to consider the Eucharist, the last Supper and also other meals at which Jesus was present. His presence makes the feast a heavenly banquet for all. In a world in need of ethical codes, it is something that embraces us all. In famine, poverty, eco-disasters and the scourge of AIDS, the church has the offering of Eucharist for all, echoing the prophesy that people will come from the north, east, south and west and take their place at the feast of the Kingdom of God (Lk. 13:29). The Bible shows us that the way to the Kingdom is narrow but all may enter although some choose to exclude themselves. Indergit sees the Eucharist as a foretaste of the feast of the Kingdom of God where all are invited and there is freedom from hunger and a place for the broken. He highlighted the hospitality that is important in Jesus' ministry and his view of all His people, as guests of honour at Jesus' table.

### **Seeing is Believing : *Graham Sparkes***

The message that Graham brought to us was that all true theology is prayer and that ultimate prayer is silence. He reminded us that the study of the Eucharist has been subject to the very human practices of reasoned debate, knowledge, explanations and statements of agreement. Through this, we have fallen out over particulars. He asked how we might discover an alternative way ahead and the particular contribution to that question he brought was what he believed to be an act of prayer: the contemplation of art. He proposed that, through art, we renew our gift of imagination, cultivate the effort of attention, search the depths through the meanings of paintings and engage with the world. As in great cathedrals, in galleries we

go beyond the superficial concerns of life and find new depths of meaning. We then considered five very varied paintings and shared our perceptions and insights of the paintings and what they revealed to us.

## **Visits**

During the week, visits were made to Stonor House (just a few miles from Parmoor), to Oxford and to the Salvation Army Citadel in Maidenhead.

### **Stonor House**

This has been the home of the Stonor family for more than 800 years and a centre of Catholicism throughout this time. Much of the family's property was confiscated after the Reformation but the house and surrounding parkland remain as their home. We were welcomed by Lord and Lady Camoys and Mrs Pat Taylor, an historian, who gave us an interesting and enlightening tour of the chapel and house. The visit demonstrated powerfully, to all of us, the fortitude and endurance of those willing to stand by their cherished beliefs.

### **Oxford**

This was a day of pilgrimage which began at the Orthodox Church where we were welcomed by Bishop Kallistos and entertained warmly by Bede and Jenny. There was a celebration of Artoklasia (the feeding of the 5000) at which we received bread dipped in wine and an anointing with oil. Hugo Brunner, The Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire addressed us before lunch and revealed plans to erect a memorial to the martyrs of Oxford, at St. Mary's Church. After an enjoyable lunch we walked to Blackfriars where Hugo's wife, Mary Rose, gave us a warm welcome and talk about the Family Mass and the arrangement of the church in a way that brings people closer to the action of the Eucharist. We stopped by the Martyr's Memorial, the site of the burning of Latimer and Ridley and then proceeded to Wesley Memorial Chapel where we received an interesting talk from the Revd. David Cooper. This focused upon the work that churches of different denominations are undertaking in care and outreach

in the city. The pilgrimage culminated with a visit to Christ Church Cathedral where we were greeted by the Precentor, Mary Bide. During the visit, we were presented with the intriguing story of St Frideswide at the restored shrine.

### **The Salvation Army Citadel, Maidenhead.**

Here we were greeted and entertained warmly by Alex and Ingeborg Hughes. We learned of the wide number of ways in which prayer is part of the worshipping community and the services which cater for those who are seeking as well as for those who are already Christians. As is so characteristic of this tradition, the care and charitable work done by the Salvation Army in Maidenhead is greatly impressive.

### **Farewells**

At the concluding session we all expressed our appreciation for the way in which we had received a deepening of understanding of the Eucharist through the events of the week. A warm fellowship had developed among us and an awareness that God's power is able to work in and transform the problems of division which may, to mere humans, seem unchangeable. A joy had been felt in the sharing of the richness of our different denominations and we left with a feeling that progress had been made and that the future in this aspect of ecumenism could be viewed with expectation and hope.