

Society for Ecumenical Studies

Receptive Ecumenism – An Overview

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I feel a little awed to be giving an overview of receptive ecumenism and ecumenical learning in the presence of Dr Paul Murray to whose tireless initiative we largely owe their prominence on the current ecumenical agenda. I hope he will not feel I am misrepresenting anything, particularly when I touch upon the immensely moving conference that he so ably organised in Durham just under two years ago.

Receptive ecumenism is the name given to the process by which churches take responsibility for their own ecumenical learning from each other. They do not, as it were, remain content to wait till they are challenged by others to the reception of truths which they may have neglected or of spiritual practices into which they have not yet entered but are prepared to be pro-active in their learning as part of their corporate discipline consequent upon their claim to catholicity. They recognise that the catholicity of the Church is not a static, unchanging given; rather it is an expanding reality under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he seeks to lead the Church into all truth, that all truth being not simply or perhaps even primarily fullness of theological understanding but, even more, richness of spiritual interchange and communion.

Charles’ Wesley’s line ‘thy truth we lovingly receive’ sums up the spirituality

that inspires receptive ecumenism. It is an expression of our love for God and most particularly of our thankfulness for the gifts that he gives us through His inspiration of others in their leading of the Christian life in all its fullness. It is important to be able to receive those gifts graciously and humbly.

As Paul Murray reminds us in his two papers, conversion and maturity through ecumenical learning are not about seeking a lowest common denominator or about playing fast and loose with the heritage of our particular churches; rather they are about becoming more authentically what God has called us to be. In terms of the Roman Catholic Church, it is a matter of becoming more catholic precisely by becoming more appropriately Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist and so on; the same *pari passu* applies to the rest of us.

Origins

The term receptive ecumenism is of recent origin, most significantly being used by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Durham, when, following an initiative by Dr Paul Murray and in conjunction with other Catholic sponsors, it promoted a conference on Catholic Learning and Receptive Ecumenism. This focused in particular on what the Roman Catholic Church might learn from its Orthodox, Anglican and Methodist partners, the three traditions being chosen not on any exclusive basis but because they are the partners with the Catholics in the local ministerial training programme.

The Conference, which included about 150 ecumenists and church leaders, was a moving event in spiritual as well as academic terms. The participants from the other traditions drew the lesson that they had much to learn about the value of receptive ecumenism for their own traditions.

In his explanation of the rationale for the Conference, Paul Murray adduced an important contextual rationale from the current state of the Ecumenical Movement. He reminded us of the current sense, perhaps especially within the Roman Catholic Church, that the movement towards organic unity seemed stalled for an indefinite period. The high hopes of the immediate

aftermath of Vatican II had been dashed, particularly where Anglican-Roman Catholic relationships were concerned. Nevertheless, Pope John Paul II had constantly re-iterated his commitment to ecumenism and the largely transformed nature of ecclesial relationships within the major traditional denominations meant that there could be no going back to older forms of isolation and self-sufficiency. Perhaps the Church was being called to make progress in mutual learning and reception during this difficult period in which the call to unity remains insistent despite the apparent elusiveness of the ultimate goal of full communion in faith and life. Such progress in mutual learning will not be a second best strategy in the present interim but will play an essential role in preparing for the full restoration of unity.

Paul's insight can be complemented by one from the veteran French ecumenist, Bernard Sesboue, who, in a recent book, argues that the sense of ecumenical disillusionment which set in after the initial élan provided by Vatican II was largely due to two factors, an initial naivety as to the speed at which change could be effected accompanied by a failure on the part of all the churches to effect what he calls the difficult conversion of mentalities and memories. Our denominational identities are still too narrow and must face the challenge of radical broadening and reception from others-that is where commitment to receptive ecumenism could make a big difference.

The late Pope John Paul II placed great stress on the exchange of gifts, on the importance of dialogue and on the sheer fecundity of the grace of the Holy Spirit who, as he put it, makes surprising discoveries possible and who is always enriching His Church with new styles of Christian devotion and discipleship, gifts which are there to be shared all the more fully as the churches grow towards fuller communion.

Since the Durham Conference and, in my opinion, providentially convergently, two key ecumenical reports have placed great emphasis upon the exchange of gifts and mutual reception. The most recent report of the Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue, *The Grace Given You In Christ* has come up with a whole series of suggestions as to strengths in the partner churches from which the

other might learn. What is particularly instructive is to note the way in which both partners have allowed themselves to be challenged by the witness of the other and have confessed themselves willing to learn from the other. Thus, for example, we find the Methodists accepting that 'Greater awareness of the communion of saints and the Church's continuity in time, the sacramental use of material things and sacramental ministry to the sick and dying are also ecclesial elements and endowments that Methodists might profitably receive from Roman Catholics'.

At the Durham Conference itself, Bishop Michael Putney, co-chair of the international MRCIC commission, paid eloquent tribute to the way in which his own ministry had been enriched by the inspiration he had received from studying the life and work of the Wesleys.

The other report is that of IARCCUM, an organisation set up after a consultation between representative Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops to make practical proposals for ways in which Anglicans and Roman Catholics can learn from each other and so draw closer to each other.

Looking at the situation from the point of view of one who has long been involved in local ecumenism, most recently as a temporary county ecumenical officer for Bristol, I would add a couple of points.

First, that at least between the members and ministers of the mainstream traditionally ecumenically involved churches, there is now a feeling of general goodwill and acceptance that, at least in theory, ecumenical co-operation is a good thing, particularly when one is faced with complex mission situations e.g. inner city or new housing estates, where no one church-not even the Established Church with all its resources- is adequate to the challenge. However, this feeling of goodwill is often combined with a very real degree of puzzlement as to the culture and ways of other churches (a good example would be the Methodist circuit preaching plan, so often an object of mystery to Anglicans and to the other free churches). Working even more against any concept of real receptive learning are also lingering ideas of self-sufficiency

and local identity which can obscure a sense of common responsibility to the wider church and its mission.

There is sometimes still a degree of ignorance and suspicion of other traditions. It takes a strong person within a confident tradition to be prepared to learn from others. At the Durham conference two of the most valuable papers were those produced by Philip Sheldrake and Geraldine Smyth. The former dealt with the importance of all Christians becoming catholic persons, open to learning and enrichment from any authentic source. The latter dealt with the very real need in any learning and growing process to let go of fears, to be prepared to abandon identities that have been forged largely in reaction against others and to develop new identities.

It is important to prepare the ground for receptive ecumenism, particularly in smaller churches that may feel themselves overshadowed by larger partners. I spend quite a bit of my time trying to assure fellow English Methodists that our present covenant relationship with the Church of England is not designed to result in the ultimate simple absorption of Methodism, despite Anglican superiority in numbers and resources, by the Church of England but in a process of mutual reception in which both churches will freely, joyfully and gratefully discern what it is that God is calling them to receive from each other to the greater benefit and enrichment of their corporate life and witness in Christ. There is an extremely delicate balance to be achieved within all churches between proper confidence in the abiding riches of their own traditions and willingness to learn from others. There is sometimes an important distinction to be made between what has been simply negative and reactive within a particular tradition-and which now needs to be abandoned and what is truly positive and a gift for others.

However, I want to conclude this section of my paper with two encouraging and inspiring examples. One is from the review of a multi-congregation LEP near to Bristol where there is particularly good relationship between an Anglican church which is unashamedly in the more catholic tradition and a joint URC-Methodist congregation which is confessedly evangelical. It was

particularly inspiring to hear the Anglicans say that much as they value their 'catholic' tradition, they also value the exuberance and joy which characterise worship at the evangelical church and they feel that that experience has enriched their understanding of the range of Christian worship. From their side, some of the members of the united URC/Methodist church expressed their appreciation of the quieter and more contemplative style of worship in the parish church.

My second example is from a study day held recently at Crawley under the auspices of the diocesan ecumenical Commission of Arundel and Brighton. The subject was the most recent Catholic-Methodist report as already mentioned. The participants were mainly Catholics and it was touching to note their enthusiasm for learning about a dialogue of which most of them had scarcely previously been aware and for receiving what spiritual riches they could from Methodism. They also showed a great concern to improve communication between the diocesan ecumenical commission and the grass-roots of the parishes.

We have a long way yet to go in ecumenical reception, but there are encouraging shoots of hope at the most local level.

Theological and spiritual basis

Though the term receptive ecumenism is of recent origin, its roots lie deep in the Christian tradition and one can argue that, to a degree, some form of it has always been practiced, notably by John Wesley who was constantly re-examining the early history of the Church and looting the spiritual classics of the counter-reformation as well as those of the early fathers, the Puritans, the continental pietists and the Caroline divines in order to provide for his preachers in his Christian Library.

Our current consensus on the ecclesiology of communion implies an acceptance that the Church is, at every level, a total learning partnership in Christ in which there is a constant process of giving and receiving from each

other. Those who bear the responsibility of episcopate within their churches, whether as bishops in the historic succession or otherwise, have a responsibility not just to teach but to receive whether it be from the insights of their own faithful, from other leaders within their traditions or from other communions. They have a responsibility to be porous, as Jean –Marie Tillard puts it, to the concerns and insights of other churches. The processes in such reception are always corporate and ecclesial, the minister and church meeting in the independent tradition, Conference and the local forms of episcopate within Methodism, bishops and synods within the Anglican, Old Catholic and some Lutheran churches, Pope and bishops in the Roman Catholic tradition but in that last case with the proviso that the bishop receives from his local church as well as transmitting to it! Ideally, there is always what the nineteenth century Wesleyan ecclesiologist, Benjamin Gregory called ‘the finest circulation of love’ within each system, however differently calibrated.

It is important for each tradition to dig deep within the roots of its own tradition to uncover its own testimony, however subsequently obscured, to the tradition of receptive ecumenism. I have concentrated on doing this in respect of the two traditions that I know best, my own and that of the Roman Catholic church. Within Methodism, I have already referred to the personal example of Wesley which was deeply rooted in his sense of Methodism as being nothing other than rooted in the Great Tradition and needing constantly to learn from it. As he said in 1777, ‘Methodism is nothing other than the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church as well as of the whole Church in the purest ages...it is found in the works of Chrysostom, of Basil and of Ephrem Syrus...and it is also the religion of the Church of England from the uniform tenor of her liturgy and numerous passages in her homilies’.

We can trace the tradition further in the writings of William Shrewsbury with his insistence that the Methodists as the then youngest communion, are the ‘debtors of all’ and his firm insistence on the co-equal value within the Wesleyan tradition of both liturgical and extempore forms of prayer. We see it in Benjamin Gregory and his insistence that the churches will only ever reunite ‘not by absorption but by gradual and sound assimilation’ It is there in

declarations of the Conference, in the call of the Covenant service to 'new ventures in fellowship' and most recently in our common affirmation in the Anglican-Methodist Covenant upon harvesting the riches of both our traditions.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the call to receptive ecumenism is certainly explicit within the Decree of Ecumenism of Vatican II with its call to seek together with the separated brethren into the riches of the common faith. It is also there in the statement that 'whatever is wrought by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian...can always result in a more ample realisation of the very mystery of Christ and the Church'. Since Vatican II, John Paul II has, in particular, reinforced its teaching, calling, in *Oriental Lumen*, upon the Church to breathe with both its lungs and in *Ut Unum Sint*, upon the Church and the churches to appreciate the rich embellishment of the Tradition which has occurred in the period of separation despite the 'objective evil of schism'. The former pontiff also stated in 2001 that the great task of the Church in the third millennium was to become 'the home and school of communion'.

In their most recent report, the members of MRCIC echo the tradition of both their churches when they affirm that

'It is now time to return to the concrete reality of one another, to look one another in the eye, and with love and esteem to acknowledge what we see to be truly of Christ and the Gospel, and thereby *of the Church* in one another.'

Finally, we should note the relationship of receptive ecumenism to spiritual ecumenism, interest in which has been revived recently, particularly as a result of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Fr Paul Couturier, its foremost early twentieth century exponent, and of the emphasis upon it by Cardinal Kasper. There is no doubt in my mind that Vatican II was absolutely right to teach that 'concern for restoring unity pertains to the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike'. Truly legitimate and enriching unity will only come about when all the people of God respond to the call and inspiration of the Spirit by

living out the whole of their lives, in individual and communal relationships, within Church and world alike, in the spirit of the Beatitudes and with the aid of the fruits of the Spirit. Particularly important are the virtues of humility, patience and joy. There must be humility in terms of willingness to learn, perhaps even and most particularly sometimes from those who we may have regarded as having little to teach us. We must have patience as we encounter the ways and traditions of other churches that may sometimes seem so strange to us. Above all, we must have joy. We must be able, as Paul Murray puts it, to delight in the gifts of others, able to receive them with eagerness and enthusiasm. Benjamin Gregory in commenting on Colossians 2 v2 stresses that Paul's teaching is that we must love first in order to understand, not the reverse.

Two other significant Pauline texts are relevant here. Firstly, Romans 1.12 where Paul talks of his longing to visit the church at Rome in order that both he and the Christians of Rome may be edified and strengthened by each other's faith. Another text is 1 Cor 3:21-2. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their factionalism, proceeding to argue how absurd it is. 'For everything belongs to you-Paul, Apollos and Cephas, the world, life and death, the present and the future, all are yours, you are Christ's and Christ is God's'. It is the whole richness of the patrimony of the entire Church that is the heritage of every Christian, every local church and every tradition within the Church. What God has given, we are to receive thankfully. We are to 'accept one another as Christ accepted us', not at the minimal level of simple tolerance but at the level of true reception in love, preferring one another in honour. That, in a nutshell, is the vision of receptive ecumenism.

I will add one final thought, that it may also be that as we draw closer together in this spirit that we shall find the solution to some of those problems which at the moment seem unsolvable.

