

Society for Ecumenical Studies

Receptive Ecumenism – An Orthodox Perspective

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Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan of Diokleia

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Whenever I hear the phrase ‘receptive ecumenism’, there comes to my mind the third-century wall-painting of the Orans in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. This depicts a veiled woman, standing with her open hands uplifted and with her eyes raised to heaven. Who or what is she: the Church, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the human soul at prayer? Or is she perhaps all three of these things at once? Whatever the answer, she expresses exactly the spiritual attitude implied by the words ‘receptive ecumenism’: an attitude of prayerful watchfulness, of waiting upon the Holy Spirit, of openness to the divine initiative. ‘Receptive ecumenism’ surely signifies, not only that we should be receptive in relation to our fellow Christians, but also, and much more fundamentally, that we should be receptive in relation to God. Our horizontal receptiveness presupposes, as its source and inspiration, a vertical receptiveness.

If we interpret ‘receptive ecumenism’ from such a perspective as this, taking as our ikon the Orans in the catacombs, it means that we view the attainment

of Christian unity as pre-eminently the work of God, as a divine and supernatural action: 'not I, but Christ in me' (Gal. 2:20). Our quest for visible reconciliation is precisely summed up in words spoken by the deacon to the priest immediately before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy: 'It is time for the Lord to act' (Psalm 118 [119]: 126).¹ The Holy Eucharist, that is to say, is not simply words but an action; and, as an action, it is not primarily our action but the action of Christ the Lord. As the celebrant says to Christ in the prayer before the Great Entrance: 'You are the one who offers and who is offered.' The same is true of Christian unity: the work is primarily Christ's, not ours; he is the one who acts, and we can do no more than share in his action.

The point is well made by Karl Barth: 'The union of the Churches is not a manufactured article; one discovers and finds it through obedience to Christ, in whom unity is already accomplished.'² Visible, organic unity, when eventually it comes to pass, will be a miracle of God. Our task is to remove the human obstacles that hinder the accomplishment of this divine miracle, and thus to clear the way so that there may be free scope for the Lord to act. 'Receptive ecumenism' signifies, therefore, learning and receiving from one another; but this will prove effective only if on both sides we are seeking to learn and receive from God. Abbé Couturier emphasized the right order of priorities when he advocated a week of *prayer* for Christian unity: not just a week of discussions, lectures and conferences, but a week of insistent prayer, when like the Orans we call upon the Holy Spirit. 'Receptive ecumenism' signifies a continual *epiclesis* of the Paraclete.

This means that there are three qualities above all that are needed in receptive ecumenism. The first quality is *silence*. Receptive ecumenists would do well to take as motto the words of Søren Kierkegaard, 'If I were a doctor and were asked for my advice, I should say: Create silence.' Equally they may take to heart the saying of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, 'Man is what he does with his silence.' It might be helpful if, from time to time, we observed each January a week of *silence* for Christian unity, when in shared but silent prayer we waited quietly upon God.

This, however, raises immediately the question: What do we mean by silence, understood in religious terms? Is it merely something negative, an absence of sound, a pause between words? Or should it rather be envisaged in positive terms, not as emptiness but as fullness, not as an absence but as a presence? It is of course true that in our human encounters silence can often be destructive, a refusal to establish contact, a denial of the other as person. But, in the religious context with which we are here concerned, silence signifies the opposite of this: not denial but affirmation, not isolation but relationship. It denotes openness and awareness of the Other. As Georges Bernanos said, 'Silence is a presence: at the heart of it is God.' In the Psalms, it is not merely stated 'Be still', but 'Be still, and *know that I am God*' (Psalm 45 [46]:10); stillness, *hesychia*, is nothing else than God-awareness. Stillness presupposes the quality of attentiveness to which Simone Weil attached central importance. The hesychast is the one who fulfils Beatrice's injunction to Dante: 'Look well'.

All this is summed up by St Ambrose of Milan in the paradoxical phrase *negotiosum silentium*, silence that is not vacant but filled with *negotium*, with substance and meaning – silence that is purposeful, active, creative. In short, true silence, genuine stillness of the heart, signifies an attitude of listening. When I reflect on the value of listening, at once there comes to my mind an incident from my favourite radio programme during my student days, the Goon Show. The telephone goes, and Harry Secombe lifts the receiver. 'Hullo,' he says, 'who's there? Hullo, I can't hear you, who's speaking?' The voice at the other end replies, 'You are speaking.' 'Ah,' he responds, 'I thought the voice sounded familiar', and he puts the receiver down. That, sadly, illustrates what happens all too often when we try to pray. We hear the sound of our own voice, but we are unable to be still, unable to listen, and so we fail to hear the wordless voice of the Other speaking to us on the noetic telephone line. One of the most difficult tasks on the journey of prayer is how to stop talking and to start listening. (It is precisely here that a way of praying such as the Jesus Prayer can prove an invaluable aid.) By the same token, receptive ecumenism is to stop talking and to start listening – to start listening alike to God and to one another.

If receptive ecumenism presupposes silence, then in the second place it requires of us a spirit of *repentance*. As St Isaac the Syrian insisted, ‘This life has been given to you for repentance. Do not waste it on other things.’³ Let us think in this context of the literal sense of the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, which has the meaning ‘change of mind’. Repentance is not only, and not primarily, a feeling of regret and remorse. It is, far more deeply, a new way of looking at myself, at my neighbour, and at God. To repent is to open my eyes, to reverse the perspective, to stand the pyramid on its head. All of this applies directly to our work for Christian unity. Unless we enter upon such work with a searching and inexorable desire to repent – to change our minds, to challenge our presuppositions, to be radically transformed – our ecumenical efforts will be trivial and superficial.

This does not mean that I am to repent of the fact that I am Orthodox (or Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist or Pentecostal, as the case may be). On the contrary, I am to see my Orthodox identity as a gift of grace from God, for which I am profoundly grateful. But I am to repent of the fact that I am such a poor and inadequate member of the Orthodox Church. I am to repent because my understanding of Orthodoxy is so petty and restricted. I am to repent, that is to say, not only of my moral failings but of the narrowness of my imaginative vision. Repentance, interpreted in this far-reaching sense, is thus closely related to the first characteristic that we have mentioned, that of silence, understood as creative listening.

In the third place, receptive ecumenism requires of us a *Trinitarian mode* of thinking and of living. As Charles Wesley affirmed in one of his hymns:

... you whom He ordained to be
transcripts of the Trinity.

‘God is love’, says St John (1 John 4:8). To which we may add: not self-love but shared and mutual love. Our Christian God is not just personal but interpersonal, not just a unit but a union or communion. He is one God, yet

one in three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we who are created in the image and likeness of God the Trinity are called to reproduce on earth this divine interpersonal communion of shared love. Earlier I suggested that silence signifies not isolation but relationship. But if we speak of relationship, then at once we need to add: the model and paradigm of all human relationship is nothing less than the Holy Trinity. In a Christian context there can be no genuine giving and receiving that is not Trinitarian. If, then, by receptive ecumenism we mean listening to one another in creative silence, and thereby giving and receiving from each other, it follows that receptive ecumenism needs to set, at the very centre of its agenda, a deepened awareness of the Trinitarian nature of God.

It is encouraging to note that the recent report of the Anglican-Orthodox International Dialogue, *The Church of the Triune God*, which was adopted at the 2006 meeting in Cyprus, begins its discussion of ecclesiology by emphasizing the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity. Appositely, it quotes the words of Origen, 'The Church is full of Trinity.'⁴ A Trinitarian perspective of this kind lies at the very heart of receptive ecumenism.

If such is our approach to the search for unity – an approach marked by silence, repentance and faith in the Trinity – how best may we answer the question: 'What can and does my Church learn and receive from other Christian traditions? And what do these other Christian traditions need to learn and receive from my own tradition?' My first inclination, in responding to this question, is to draw up two lists: first, a list of things that the Orthodox Church can learn from others, and then another list of things that the others can learn from Orthodoxy. Very quickly, however, I discover that this approach will not work. As soon as I think that I have identified an area about which I can say, 'Here is something that Orthodoxy can give to others', immediately I realise: 'But this is something that we Orthodox need ourselves to understand far better, and the other Christian communities can help us to do precisely this.' In other words, giving and receiving, teaching and learning, are mutually interdependent. And so, instead of preparing two lists, I end up with only one: a series of themes that we all of us need to explore in common.

Let me give three examples. First, in the domain of ecclesiology, Orthodox theologians during the twentieth century have given much emphasis to the eucharistic character of the Church. This was the master-theme of Nicolas Afanassieff, whose viewpoint exercised a significant influence on the discussions at Vatican II; and more recently his ideas have been refined and deepened by Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon. But the same Eucharistic approach to ecclesiology has been developed equally in a Roman Catholic context by Henri de Lubac. As Paul McPartlan has shown in his excellent book *The Eucharist Makes the Church*,⁵ Zizioulas and de Lubac complement each other.

Again, keeping still to ecclesiology, as an Orthodox I am tempted to suggest that Roman Catholicism has much to learn from the Orthodox understanding of conciliarity and *sobornost*. But then I reflect on the way in which, during recent Orthodox history, our conciliarity has all too often become something atrophied and theoretical; in practice our conciliar structures have fallen largely into disuse. Surely we need the help of the West in reviving them. It may be that we Orthodox also need a strengthened awareness of the meaning of universal primacy; for when disputes arise between different Autocephalous Churches – as, for example, between Constantinople and Moscow concerning the Orthodox Church in Estonia – we seem to have no effective method of reaching a solution. But then we Orthodox in turn may be able to help Rome to reinterpret its primacy in terms that are pastoral rather than juridical. At every point we find that it is not a question of one side learning and receiving from the other, but of the two sides engaging simultaneously in a shared exploration.

The same can be said, in the second place, concerning our Christian response to the present-day ecological crisis. Orthodox theology sets a high value upon the material creation; this can be seen, for example, in the emphasis placed upon the materiality of the elements used during our sacramental worship, and more particularly in the Orthodox understanding of the icon. This has led recent Patriarchs of Constantinople to insist with great

clarity upon our Christian responsibility for the environment. The late patriarch Dimitrios, as long ago as 1989, spoke of the need for a 'eucharistic and ascetic spirit' in the daily life of each one of us, and he established 1 September – the start of the Church's Year in Orthodoxy – as a 'Day of Creation'. His successor, Bartholomew, the present occupant of the Ecumenical Throne, has justly been called the 'Green Patriarch';⁶ for no other Christian leader has assigned priority to ecological issues in the way that he has done. At the congress on Patmos in 1995, he affirmed that abuse of the environment is not just a technological miscalculation but a sin, not just an error of judgement but a profound moral and spiritual deviation. More recently at Venice in 2002, he argued with great force that there can be no ecological healing without costly sacrifice on our part. Sacrifice, he said, is exactly the 'missing dimension' in our ecological programme.

Here, so we Orthodox may not unreasonably claim, in this concern for ecological repentance and transfiguration there is something specific and timely that we can impart to our Western brothers and sisters. Yet then at once we have to remind ourselves how much creative thinking on this very theme is also to be found among Western Christians and, indeed, among members of other faiths, as among agnostics and atheists. Our Orthodox spirituality of matter can be rendered incomparably more relevant and realistic through the scientific expertise that has been acquired in the West. It is not simply a question of Orthodoxy teaching the West; we have to learn also, and this we have only just begun to do. In ecology, as in ecclesiology, the separated Christian communities have simultaneously to learn from, as well as to teach, one another. Reciprocity is all-essential. Only through shared exploration can progress be made.

In the third place, this applies equally to the Christian doctrine of the human person. In the twentieth century, the central question for Christian theology was ecclesiological: What is the Church? In the twenty-first century, while ecclesiological issues still need to be debated, the focus has already begun to alter, and the central question has become anthropological: What does it mean to be human? That question underlies some of the most burning

theological controversies in the Christian world today. For instance, the problem of the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate is in large measure a problem concerning our theology of the human person: what, we need to ask, is the theological significance of the distinction within humankind between male and female? Is it just a physiological distinction, involving solely the realm of procreation, or does it have deeper spiritual implications, involving our whole understanding of priesthood and liturgy? Another example is the current debate about homosexuality and same-sex 'marriages'; this again depends upon our doctrine of the human person.

Now, if we are honest, we have surely to admit that, in all our different Christian traditions, our theology of human personhood is at present in an undeveloped state. We do not as yet have ready-made exhaustive answers to the many new challenges posed to us in the field of sexuality and bioethics. We all of us need to learn – to learn by listening to each other, and to learn by listening together to the anguish of the secular world. In anthropology, as in ecclesiology and ecology, we have everything to gain from mutual co-operation. By learning from one another, and at the same time teaching one another, let us explore in common the urgent issues that at present we understand so imperfectly.

In his seminal yet neglected work, *Persons in Relation*, the philosopher John Macmurray summed up his vision of human personhood in the phrase: I need you in order to be myself.⁷ The same principle is equally true not only of persons in relation but of Churches in relation. As Christian communities, we each need the other in order to be ourselves. That is precisely the essence of 'receptive ecumenism'.

* Talk given at the London day conference on Receptive Ecumenism, organized by the Society for Ecumenical Studies on 3 November 2007.

¹ Some translations of the Divine Liturgy render this phrase, 'It is time for us to begin the service to the Lord'; but theologically and philologically this seems less exact than the version I have given. The Greek text (as also the Hebrew text of the Psalms) does not contain the words 'for us'.

² Quoted in Geoffrey Curtis, *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ* (London, 1964), p. 86.

³ *Ascetical Homilies 74 (79)*, tr. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, 1984), p. 364.

⁴ *On the Psalms 23:1 (PG 12: 1265B)*.

⁵ Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in dialogue*, 2nd edition (Fairfax, VA: Eastern Christian Publications, 2006).

⁶ See John Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace: Humble Prayer. The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2003).

⁷ *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 69.