

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Cardinal Koch and his *Prolusio*

David Carter

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The new Head of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity is Cardinal Kurt Koch, formerly Bishop of Basle in Switzerland where I understand he was well appreciated. Not much about him has yet appeared in the English press but John Bolger of One in Christ recently e-mailed me a copy of his *Prolusio* or Inaugural Address to the PCPCU and I share a brief summary of this with some comments.

The Cardinal begins by reminding us of the ecumenical heritage of the Catholic Church and its continuing commitment to the search for unity. He then addresses a series of problems in relationships with the Orthodox and Protestant churches. He concludes by looking at the connection between mission and unity, so strongly stressed last year as we celebrated the centenary of the Edinburgh Conference. Finally, he stresses the key importance of spiritual ecumenism. He argues that it is still not sufficiently emphasised in the everyday life of the Church. 'It is necessary for the revitalisation of the spiritual roots of ecumenical work' (my translation).

The Cardinal recounts key difficulties that remain in dialogue with the Orthodox and the Protestants. With the former, he argues that the key problem lies in their differing ways of understanding eucharistic ecclesiology. For the Orthodox, it underlines the principle of autocephaly since each local church is fully church in virtue of the presence within it of the one bishop celebrating the one eucharist. For Roman Catholics, however, the ministry of the Bishop of Rome is not, as Orthodox might think, external to this, but internal and necessary to the unity of all the local churches with each other. The Cardinal records that the 2007 report of the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue saw a continuing impasse on this.

With Protestants, the problems are greater. Cardinal Koch feels that many of them have abandoned the goal of full visible unity in favour of unity in reconciled diversity in which they bestow mutual eucharistic hospitality on each other but remain essentially separate.

Whether the Cardinal's assessment of this is entirely complete is another matter. He is clearly influenced by his knowledge of the position of some of the continental Protestant churches. I am told that he knows little English and that his knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world is therefore necessarily more limited. No doubt, he will soon turn his attention to this and recognise that, for example, the United Reformed Church in Britain has the very clear commitment to visible unity that he feels is lacking in some of its continental sister churches.

The Cardinal is right to query how strong popular support for unity is in some of the Protestant churches. He is right also to query the way in which the catch-phrase 'unity in reconciled diversity' is used. He argues that the term is 'true and beautiful in itself' but clearly feels, not without cause, that it is often given a minimal 'live and let live' interpretation which is a pity. One might add that, in the strong sense, of true unity in faith, the Roman Catholic Church is itself a church united in reconciled diversity, of the Latin rite church and the twenty or so eastern rite churches which have come into communion with it over the centuries, to say nothing of the new Ordinariate!

In understanding how Anglican and Protestant churches can sometimes come into communion with each other, one has to understand that this is not done without basic agreement in the apostolic faith. This preceded the setting up of the Leuenberg Fellowship in 1973, the Porvoo Communion in 1992 and the making of the English and Irish Anglican-Methodist Covenants later. These churches do have their own clear doctrinal standards though they may allow for some diversity on matters that they see as *theologoumena* or opinions but which the Catholic Church by contrast regards as matters of *de fide* revelation. Such matters of course, need continuing exploration in dialogue.

In a beautiful passage, Cardinal Koch talks of the way in which the Church must be an icon of the Trinity, a point that is consistent with the trinitarian ecclesiology in the last British Methodist ecclesiological report, *Called To Love and Praise* in 1999. It is this which explains his very proper impatience with anything that does not progress beyond simple recognition to more fully accountable unity in which there is sharing of life at the deepest level. This is a rather slight report but I hope it gives some indication of the thinking of the new head of the PCPCU.