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Long road to unity

As Christianity grows ever more diverse, is unity an absurd hope – or even desirable? A recent international conference in Durham confirmed that although progress is slow, a new way of ‘doing’ ecumenism is starting to bear fruit

Christianity, with two billion adherents worldwide, is the largest, fastest growing, most dispersed and most fragmented world religion. There are estimated to be 34,000 denominational groupings that share the same fundamental articles of Christian faith but exhibit greatly differing patterns of belief and practice. In the face of this enormous plurality it is as though we have not just one religion, but multiple Christianities and (with the exception of the growth of Protestant mega-church congregations) the global trend is directed towards the proliferation of diverse and localised varieties of Christianity, as opposed to ecclesial consolidation and convergence.

The question, inevitably, is how these many and varied expressions of Christianity relate to the one Church of Christ. In the face of such diversity, talk of future Christian unity appears absurd to many sociologists of religion. Yet this remains the aspiration of the ecumenical movement throughout the mainstream Churches. How realistic is such a goal? Are aspirations for Christian unity viable or even desirable in this postmodern era of pluralism, celebration of difference and live-and-let-live laissez faire? Some dismiss ecumenism as a Cinderella subject doomed to fail, on the basis that there are multiple legitimate ways of living the Christian life; the concept of unity is therefore otiose. Others, who would equate their own brand of Christianity with the truth in its entirety, attack ecumenism from the opposite direction.

These are not the only challenges facing ecumenists today. While the malign influence of Christian sectarian suspicion and conflict has to a certain degree subsided, tensions between some religions have re-intensified and matters of interreligious dialogue and cooperation have understandably become an urgent priority. As a consequence, this vital work has overshadowed somewhat ongoing efforts to advance Christian unity. This is not to mention the Christian in-house tensions caused by issues construed as setbacks to Christian unity, such as Catholic expressions of concern over female ordination to priesthood and episcopacy in the Anglican Communion, and Protestant disquiet over shifts in Catholicism’s ecumenical mood music since the publication of *“Dominus Iesus”* in 2000. Furthermore, Pope Benedict’s “firm commitment to making the recovery of full and visible Christian unity a priority” has focused thus far chiefly

on overcoming internal Catholic divisions through his attempts to end the schism between the post-Vatican II Church and the Tridentine Lefebvrists.

Yet these issues indicate all the more why Churches at local, national and international levels need to be engaged in dialogue and to build bridges through shared prayer and fellowship. Ecumenical gains have been made in efforts to identify what unites and divides in belief and practice, to clarify how theological language is used and understood, and to tackle misunderstanding, ignorance and prejudice; official channels of



communication are open; bilateral and multilateral dialogues continue; joint statements on contentious matters of theology and church order have been issued; and on occasion, Churches are prepared jointly to enter the public arena, stand together in solidarity and speak with one evangelical voice on pressing issues of justice. Quietly, and without fanfare, behind the “breaking news” of Christianity, Churches have moved closer together and cooperation has increased.

However, the rate of progress is painfully slow, and ecumenical achievements have not always made their full impact on the life of the Christian Churches. For instance, agreed statements issued as the theological fruit of bilateral dialogues – such as the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” issued by the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran World Federation in 1999, in which

substantial consensus was achieved – frequently remain bottom-drawer documents rather than top-of-agenda items. Effective dissemination and ecclesial reception of the results of ecumenical endeavour remain limited – so much so that the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (PCPCU), the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and World Council of Churches, and the representatives of the bilateral dialogues through the Faith and Order Commission are all currently prioritising the issue of ecclesial reception, at the level of both knowledge and appreciation, so that the progress made in ecumenical dialogue is not forgotten and lost.

Of course, reception cannot occur without a prevailing attitudinal disposition of receptivity that must be fostered constantly; and this characteristic of “receptiveness” has been rather cleverly and successfully turned into an ecumenical procedural principle in an initiative of the Centre for Catholic Studies at the University of Durham that is yielding new openness to ecumenical encounter and mutual learning. As a result, it has caught the attention of important ecumenical players including the Faith and Order Commission, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and Churches Together in England. Receptive ecumenism, as it has become known, proceeds on the basis that ecumenical progress can only occur if each ecclesial tradition asks not what other traditions might need to learn from it, but what it can learn and receive with integrity from the other traditions of Christianity.

The result is a subtle shift of emphasis in the agenda of ecumenical dialogue. As Dr Paul Murray, the director of Durham’s Centre for Catholic Studies and chief architect of the initiative has stated: “the primary aim is about promoting growth *within* each of the traditions rather than, directly at least, *between* them”. The presupposition is that each tradition’s central insights and particular priorities allow us better to understand the distinctive riches and charisms of our own tradition and can also help us identify elements that may have been overlooked, dismissed or distorted. Receptive ecumenism therefore implies a corrective ecumenism too: to the extent that one’s own tradition learns from others, it will correct its misplaced emphases, false assumptions, prejudices and errors.

Receptive ecumenism’s potential was first

tested in an international conference on Catholic Learning and Receptive Ecumenism in 2006 in which the focus was on what Catholicism might fruitfully learn from its ecumenical others (see *The Tablet*, 21 January 2006, pp. 12-13). The proceedings were published as *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: exploring a way for contemporary ecumenism* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Building on the momentum generated by the first conference, the latest phase of Durham's receptive ecumenism initiative – a second international conference – extended the conversation in two directions by asking all dialogue partners what their respective traditions might learn from one another, and by examining how receptive ecumenism might be implemented at the level of the local church. The event, jointly organised and hosted by the Centre for Catholic Studies and St Cuthbert's Catholic Seminary, Ushaw College, and held in conjunction with the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network from 11-15 January 2009 drew 200 delegates comprising church leaders, local church activists, theologians, social scientists and educationalists among others, and representing 21 church traditions, 19 countries and four continents. Interestingly, and a sign of the seriousness with which the Catholic bishops of England and Wales regard ecumenism, eight of their number were in attendance during the conference.

An important feature of the Durham initiative is the three-year Regional Comparative Research Project in Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church which, through empirical research, is mapping a network of Churches in the north-east of England and evaluating their organisational effectiveness. This multidisciplinary project aims to identify the various instances of good practice in the traditions and to facilitate a process of mutual learning. The research focuses on three interrelated aspects of ecclesial infrastructure: cultures of governance and finance; patterns of leadership and ministry; and practices of learning and formation. In addition to their potential for fostering ecumenical learning, the findings will surely add to the meagre hard data currently available on the effectiveness of church structures at the local level, and could be of particular value given the variegated ecclesial context of the United Kingdom.

The local church was also the starting point for Jenny Bond of Churches Together in England, who reminded delegates of some of the grass-roots realities of ecclesial separation, such as interdenominational marriage and ensuing decisions concerning the religious education and formation of offspring, the sharing of church buildings, matters of eucharistic hospitality/intercommunion and so on. The human stories of struggle and pain at the heart of these experiences, and the failure on the part of churches to address the pastoral needs associated with them remind us not only of why ecumenism is worthwhile, but also why it remains necessary. In short, the five-day event proved to be an exercise not just in talking

about the concept of receptive ecumenism, but in living it; with the poignant experience of shared prayer and worship symbolising and effecting the unity of the participants at the same time that the breaking of bread painfully underlined our ecclesial disunity.

How might receptive ecumenism challenge Catholics, in particular? Fifty years ago, Pope John XXIII dropped the bombshell that he was to convoke an ecumenical council. He chose to do so at the closing ceremony of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (as it is now known), placed Christian unity and church reform firmly on the council's agenda, and invited the separated Churches to participate with Catholics in making that goal a reality. The wall of curial silence that greeted John's announcement spoke eloquently of how many in the Vatican viewed Catholicism as a teaching Church and not as a Church that might learn from other Christians or the wider world of human experience. However, despite increasingly Machiavellian attempts by traditionalists to scupper the process, the council entered into dialogue with the world and, in an attitude of openness and receptivity, immersed itself in an exercise of ecclesial learning. Paradoxically, this methodology of receptive learning – rendered explicit in the fourth chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* – gave rise to some of Catholicism's most remarkable teaching documents, because they were enriched by the fruits of the learning of others, including those Churches from which Catholicism had become estranged. The Second Vatican Council therefore became what the late Archbishop Denis Hurley once described as the biggest adult-education exercise in the history of the Church.

Some, such as Archbishop Lefebvre, who rejected this shift in ecclesial self-understanding, would have no truck with the ecumenical movement and dismissed the council's liturgical and other reforms as the protestantisation of Catholicism, preferring the way of a schismatic sect. Now, in a revealing display of priorities where Christian unity is concerned, the Congregation for Bishops has lifted the excommunications imposed on four priests who were validly but illicitly ordained bishops by Archbishop Lefebvre in 1988. The move was described by the Vatican as "intended to be a sign to promote unity in charity of the universal Church, and to try to vanquish the scandal of division". Scandal, however, is very much in the eyes of the beholder. That the announcement of this move took place in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of Pope John's calling of the council rejected by the Society of St Pius X offers a mixed message indeed. For a Church that values the power of symbolism, it has sent the wrong signal to the ecumenical movement both within and outside the Catholic Church.

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