

ECUMENISM: TOWARDS AN 'EXCHANGE OF GIFTS'

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AS THE LITURGICAL year moves towards celebration of the feasts of the Lord's Ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Australian Catholics are mindful of the ecumenical significance of engaging in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. While the novena of prayer for Christian unity is generally celebrated in the northern hemisphere from January 18th-27th (spanning the Feasts of the Chair of St Peter and the Conversion of St Paul), it has been customary here since Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* (1964) to dedicate the Ascension-Pentecost novena to renewed engagement with ecumenical outreach through dialogue (both formal and informal) and prayer (personal and parish-centred). Each annual celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity enables further discernment among Christians with respect to the ultimate goal of ecumenism, namely, the 'exchange of gifts' (vs the exchange of theological ideas) among the Churches. In recent years ecumenical awareness has come to be appreciated within the context of the 'New Evangelisation'.

Fr. Paul Couturier (1881-1953): Apostle of Unity¹

As a parish priest in Lyons during the 1920s, Paul Couturier worked tirelessly as a pastor to thousands of Orthodox refugees from Bolshevism. Deeply inspired by the holiness of the Orthodox tradition and as an oblate of the Benedictine Monks of Unity, the influence of Cardinal Mercier and Dom Lambert Beaudin, led him to become heavily involved in the Catholic Church Unity Octave established in 1908.² In 1935 Couturier developed this ecumenical venture into a 'Universal Week of

Prayer for the Unity of Christians in the charity and truth of Christ', taking as a personal motto the saying of Metropolitan Platon Gorodesetsky of Kiev: 'The walls of separation do not rise as far as Heaven.'

In celebrating of the 'Week of Prayer' today Christians continue to remember the 'dream' of Paul Couturier as they engage in daily intercessions derived from his original texts in 1934. Brief invocations may be inserted into the Prayers of the Faithful after the Gospel at Mass or used as intercessions during Morning and Evening Prayers of the Church. Alternatively, short prayers may be adapted to accompany a specific theme marking, in order, each day of the novena: The Unity of All Christians, The Sanctification of Catholic Christians, The Sanctification of Orthodox Christians, The Sanctification of Anglican Christians, The Sanctification of Protestant Christians, The Sanctification of the Jewish People, The Sanctification of People of Other Faiths and The Unity of all humanity in the charity and truth of Christ.³

Vatican Council II: The Decree on Ecumenism

On November 21st this year the Church will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Regintegratio*) when formal engagement with the modern ecumenical movement was undertaken. Vatican Council II thereby affirmed that under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church would recognise that 'other' Christians can contribute to whatever genuinely belongs to the faith. The Introduction to the Decree notes 'with gladness' that all who experience the impulse of grace to pledge commitment to fostering

ecumenism include:

[all] those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour. They do this not merely as individuals but also members of the corporate groups in which they have heard the Gospel, and which each regards as his or her church and, indeed, God's. And yet almost everyone, though in different ways, longs for one visible church of God, a church truly universal and sent forth to the whole world that the world may be converted to the Gospel and so be saved for the glory of God.⁴

A simple internet search re the history of Catholic ecumenical dialogue will reveal the astounding results already achieved and which are still in dynamic process since 1964. Attention may be given to the significance for Catholic ecumenism instigated via the encyclicals of P. Paul VI (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964) and P. John Paul II (*Ut Unum Sint*, 1995). The 2004 Report produced by the Joint Working Group (JWG) of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (WCC) provides further insight into the nature and purpose of ecumenical dialogue. This Report has understood the work of Christian dialogue in terms of the encounter with Jesus by the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35):

Dialogue entails walking with the other; pilgrimage is an apt metaphor for dialogue. Dialogue represents a word—neither the first nor the last—on a common journey, marking a moment between the 'already' of our past histories and the 'not yet' of our future. It images the disciples' conversation on the road to Emmaus, recounting the wonders the Lord has worked during a journey in the breaking of bread at a common table.⁵

Spiritual Ecumenism

Partners engaged in formal ecumenical dialogues between the Churches realise, as must every adult Christian come to realise, that ecumenical commitment demands spiritual commitment if the Holy Spirit is to be 'free' to bring about all things in Christ. Just as baptism calls Christians to ecumenism, so it is that, albeit imperfectly attained, there is already among the Churches union in the one Christ



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in whom we 'live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism teaches that:

Baptism constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn. But baptism, of itself, is only a beginning, a point of departure, for it is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ. Baptism is thus ordained toward a complete profession of Christ, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ himself willed it to be, and finally through a complete integration into Eucharistic communion.⁶

When misunderstood, principles governing the practice of 'reciprocal Eucharist' in the Catholic Church frequently cause concern and indignation. Briefly, four principles operate—first, because of their common faith and baptism, both prayer and worship are integral to their Christian life; secondly, since 'fellowship' (*koinonia/communio/communion*) among them is incomplete, this must be expressed in authentic worship; thirdly, Catholics do not participate fully in common Eucharist with other Christians; and fourthly, there are certain circumstances when permission may be granted for welcoming other Christians to receive spiritual nourishment by means of the sacraments of Eucharist, penance and anointing of the sick.

Since the sacrament of Eucharist is the 'ultimate sign and source of Christian unity', it is inseparably linked to full ecclesial communion.⁷ Catholic discipline, therefore, reflects the Church's self-understanding of the unbreakable union between sacramental baptism and Eucharist. Catholic ecumenical dialogues aim

precisely at enabling, once again, worship at one table of Eucharist.⁸

Public celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a way of preventing Christian communities from trivialising the ecumenical movement as simply an attempt by inter-Church theologians to merge diverse traditions of doctrine and liturgy while bypassing aspects of contention. The Week of Prayer is a sincere response to the mind and prayer of Christ as handed down to Christians in the Gospel of John:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:21-23).

The love and the truth of Christ are essential hallmarks to be reconciled among Christian Churches still suffering division through the crises of religious conflict in the course of history.

Ecumenism: The Australian Scene

While there has been less than enthusiastic involvement in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in recent years, Australian ecumenism has certainly not gone into hibernation! A common misapprehension might well be that Christian action for justice and peace is seen as merely human work and that prayer and spirituality are incidental to ecumenical endeavour. It is hoped that what follows here as a cursory glimpse of the Australian ecumenical scene, will challenge any illusions about a slackening of passion for ecclesial unity in Australia.

In re-iterating the teaching of the *Decree on Ecumenism*, the preamble to the 'Mandate of Catholic Bishops' Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations' begins by stating that:

The ecumenical movement is a grace of God, given by the Father in answer to the prayer of Jesus and supplication of the Church inspired

by the Holy Spirit. While it is carried out within the general mission of the Church to unite humanity in Christ, its own specific field is the restoration of unity among Christians. Those who are baptised in the name of Christ are, by that very fact, called to commit themselves to the search for unity. Baptismal communion tends towards full ecclesial communion. To live our baptism is to be caught up in Christ's mission of making all things one.⁹

The Australian Catholic Episcopal Commission consists of four bishops including one from the Maronite, Melkite, Ukrainian and Chaldean Dioceses. It maintains formal relations with the national Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), the Council of Australian Jewry, Catholic Diocesan Commissions for Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Relations with equivalent bodies in other Christian Churches and with Australian representatives of non-Christian world religions.

In 2004 the Australian Catholic Church became a signatory to 'Australian Churches Covenanting Together'. In 2007 the National Forum of the NCCA passed a motion that those Churches which have agreed to mutual recognition of Baptism should issue baptismal certificates containing common wording that 'N... was baptised with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' and list those Churches that have agreed to mutual recognition of Baptism. This list currently includes the Anglican Church of Australia, Antiochian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Congregational Federation of Australia, Greek Orthodox Diocese of Australia, Lutheran Church of Australia, Mar Thoma Church, Roman and Eastern Rite Catholic Church, Romanian and Serbian Orthodox Churches and the Uniting Church in Australia.¹⁰

Since the mid-1960s the NCCA has been developing a 'covenanting process' whereby those Churches in covenant partnerships agree to come together in common prayer to investigate their Christian convictions and explore together strategies for mission.

My experience of successful and sensitive ecclesial covenanting has been among the An-

glican and Roman Catholic Dioceses of Bathurst, Broken Bay, Newcastle, Maitland-Newcastle, Brisbane, Ballarat and Toowoomba.

Typical examples of mutual commitment include: an annual Ecumenical Service, a triennial review of the Covenant, a biennial Clergy Day for reflection on pastoral and theological issues, local Liturgical Services to enliven common witness to baptism and examine the growth of relationships in both communities, exploration of possibilities for sharing church plant, co-operation in preparation for Christian marriage and the Christian education of children and young people and regular meetings of the Bishops to foster their friendship and communion.¹¹

Ecclesial covenanting is now happening in parishes among Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church and Baptist communities where, for example, combined liturgies are shared during Lent, Pentecost and Advent, where clergy share pulpits once a year and the parish Councils meet annually. Combined Taize prayer and Social Justice groups are becoming firmly established.

The Australian Unity Commission of the NCCA supports eight ongoing Bilateral Dialogues: Anglican-Roman Catholic, Anglican-Lutheran, Lutheran-Roman Catholic, Anglican-Uniting Church, Catholic-Uniting Church, Anglican-Uniting Church, Uniting Church-Salvation Army and Uniting Church-Baptist. These Dialogues focus generally on texts provided by the World Council of Churches but attend also to matters concerning Australian and Torres Strait Islander heritage and multicultural concerns of the Asia-Pacific region.

Under the auspices of the Australian Catholic Episcopal Conference, all Catholic Dioceses are responsible for establishing their own formal and local occasional ecumenical activities.

Receptive Ecumenism and the 'Exchange of Gifts'

Compass Readers will recall Gideon Goosen's reflection on 'What I have learnt from Other Churches.'¹² This article will serve as an introduction to further comments offered here.

The metaphor of 'new wave' for 'Receptive Ecumenism' was used by Dr Paul D. Murray during his Australian lecture series in 2012. Indeed, may it become a wave, that originating far out to sea, can be caught only as it nears the shore by surfers bold enough to wait for the 'lip' to curl in order to ride the 'pipeline'! Revd. Dr Gerard Kelly,¹³ prominent Catholic ecumenist, 'plays' with the wave image to put serious questions to the Australian Churches: Do you want to ride this wave? How might you catch it? Where will it lead you? Are you ready for the unexpected?¹⁴

Participants in recent Australian bilateral dialogues have acknowledged that our communions hold more in common than divides them doctrinally. Nevertheless, there is a certain impasse as to how to witness to the Gospel in a market-place noted for fundamentalist attitudes and a general indifference to religion. The 'new wave' calling for 'ecumenical conversion' is leading Christians to engage in serious discernment of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the 'institutional charisms' of grace in Churches other than one's own. With Murray, we can appreciate how receptive ecumenical 'awakening' is 'properly a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head; a matter of falling in love with the experienced presence of God in people, practices, even structures of another tradition and being impelled thereby to search for ways in which all impediments might be overcome.'¹⁵

Aware of Goosen's critique of an apparent exaggerated emphasis afforded to marian devotion in many Catholic parishes, I would draw attention to an ecumenical project that exemplifies 'receptive ecumenism' at its best, namely, the final work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC 3), *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ (MGHC)*.¹⁶ My conversations with Fr Peter Cross (an Australian member of the Commission before his illness and death in 2006) prepared me for what would surely become the fruit of friendship, faith, sustained prayer and openness in dialogue coming from the Commission's trust of the Holy Spir-

it's presence among them. In so stating that 'we have learned to receive anew our own traditions, illumined and deepened by the understanding of and appreciation for each other's tradition', the Preface of MGHC confirms the contributors' experience.

Rev. Dr. Charles Sherlock (Australian Anglican member of the Commission) described for me the joy experienced from the theological 'breakthrough' leading to the decision to 'read' Mary's place in the divine plan from the Pauline perspective of fulfilment in Christ 'backwards' into history. Such an explicitly scriptural method which includes Mary within the destiny of the whole Church, was deemed more ecumenically appropriate than the familiar Catholic method of having interpreted her role in salvation 'forwardly' from its beginning in fallen creation. In this way MGHC presented Mary as having been chosen by God 'before the foundation of the world' to be 'holy and blameless and to share in the glory of Christ (Ephesians 1:3-5; 5:27). In Romans 8:13, Paul spoke, as it were, from the future retrospectively when teaching that 'those whom God predestined, he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified'.¹⁷

Conscious now of the benefits of 'receptive ecumenism', we might ask: What 'gifts' can our Australian Churches 'exchange' with each other?

At this time, the Catholic Church offers other Christians opportunities for evaluating from within their own faith traditions, the still un-tapped wisdom of Vatican Council II with respect to Word, Sacrament and Mission, and to matters affecting ecclesial authority, governance and collegiality. Theologians from various Christian traditions are encouraged to study the works of eminent Catholic ecumenists.¹⁸

Catholics can share with others the 'purification of memory' necessary for healing divisions and sinfulness of the past. In confirming the proper ordering of Mary within the 'hierarchy of truths' pertaining to Trinitarian and Christological dogmas, the Catholic Church can allay 'Protestant' fears that the Blessed Virgin

Mary has 'eclipsed' the role of Christ as one and only Mediator. As Pope Francis teaches, the Catholic Church can contribute to being a 'leaven of peace' in a war-ravaged world alongside and with trust in all Christian pilgrims.¹⁹

In seeking ecumenical unity, the Anglican Church can offer the 'gift' of its fourfold patrimony: of exercising a synodal character of governance as a corporate and conciliar system of decision-making and authority; of its distinctive spiritual tradition likened to pastoral practice including the re-establishment of religious life and the valuable gifts of evangelical and reformed piety; of the theological traditions of the Caroline Divines and the Tractarian movement as well as the contribution of 'Broad Church' thinkers who have shaped Anglican identity; and of its liturgical and musical tradition of worship in English over many centuries.²⁰

At the heart of the gift of Methodism are the gifts of John and Charles Wesley—their evangelical zeal to reform the inner life of the Church, their pursuit of personal holiness, care for the poor and their enduring hymns. The Methodist tradition of 'living in connection' at every level of ecclesial life challenges all Christian churches to live more fully what they confess. Methodist-Catholic dialogue has indicated that, although the 'spiritual empowerment of lay people for ministry and mission' is for them a 'gift' of the Spirit derived from baptism, they may, in the future, come to recognise the value the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome as a final decision-making authority in the Church.²¹

In Australia, precious 'gifts' received from Orthodox tradition and preserved within Eastern Rite Catholic communities are significant for the ecclesial life of 'Latin' Catholics. We immediately think of the ever-explicit, appreciation of the person of the Holy Spirit in the liturgical action and life of the Church and of how theology is never separate from liturgical worship 'to' God before being 'about' God. Resurrection theology is always experienced simultaneously in Eucharist as 'present real-

ity' and 'future hope'. Veneration of Ikons regarded as 'sacramentals' (vs mere 'images') indicates that in faith, they are points of contact by which the Mother of God, the saints and the mysteries of Christ touch, embrace, hold and confront one in faith.

The Lutheran-Catholic signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (31/10/1999) has been a 'gift' for both our Churches after 400 years of contention. Although there are differing theological expressions of Christ's mystery of salvation, Lutherans and Catholics have found that they can now recognise in each other the same Gospel faith.

Conclusion

Based on that of Paul Courturier, the daily prayer of the International Chemin-Neuf Community is a reminder of both the 'already' and the 'not-yet-ness' of full ecclesial communion:

Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all
be one,
we pray to You for the unity of Christians,
according to Your will, according to Your
means.

May Your Spirit enable us
to experience the suffering caused by division,
to see our sin,
and to hope beyond all hope, Amen.

NOTES

1. See <http://paulcouterier.faithweb.com/pcbbiography/2.html> & Mark Woodruff, 'Long divisions that plague the Church' (London: *The Tablet*, 18/1/2014), 8-9.

2 1908 Octave, co-founded by Anglican priests Paul Watts of the Friars of the Atonement in the USA & Spencer Jones in England with the hope of achieving reunion between the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. Cf. Catherine E. Clifford, *A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

3 www.unitas.org.uk; www.paulcouterier.org.uk. Texts may be reproduced free of charge.

4 Austin Flannery Ed., *Vatican Council II Constitutions, Decrees, Constitutions* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996), 499-450.

5 Cited in Bishop Michael Putney, *My Ecumenical Journey* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2014), 205-206.

6. Declared 24/11/1964. *Decree on Ecumenism*: 22, Austin Flannery Ed., *Vatican Council II* (New York: Costello Publ., 1996), 520.

7 Flannery, *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n.11.

8 See detailed discussion on 'Sharing in Sacramental Life' in Putney, *My Ecumenical Journey*, 146-150.

9 See under www.catholic.org.au Text accessed 29/4/14.

10 Formal Covenant statements that recognise common baptism acknowledge differences in doc-

trine and practice & especially with regard to Eucharistic communion.

11 Examples taken from the Bathurst Covenant signed by the Anglican and Catholic Bishops & their respective Vicars General, 24/5/2012.

12 See *Compass*: 4, Vol. Forty-Seven—Summer, 2013, 12-16.

13 Dr Kelly is Chair of the NCCA's Faith & Unity Commission, Co-Chair of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in Australia, member of Australian Catholic Council for Ecumenical & Interreligious Relations and Interfaith Commission of the Archdiocese of Sydney.

14G. Kelly, 'A New Ecumenical Wave', Public Lecture NCCA Forum, Canberra, 12/7/2010.

15 Paul D. Murray, *Healing for Wounded Hands: The promise and potential of Receptive Ecumenism*, Australian Workshop Booklet, 2012.

16 Donald Bolen & Gregory Cameron Eds., *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ* (Continuum, 2006).

17 See *MGHC*, 56 ff.

18 E.g. Yves Congar, Walter Kasper, J-M Tillard, Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Karl Rahner, George Tavard and Michael Putney.

19 See Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Holy See: Catholic Truth Society, 2014), 116-117.

20 Mark Woodruff Ed., *Anglicans and Catholics in Communion* (UK: The Catholic League, 2011), vii-viii.

21 See M. Putney, *My Ecumenical Journey*, 210-217.