

# ON BEING LESS CATHOLIC AND MORE CHRISTIAN

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IT MIGHT SOUND heretical to suggest Catholics should be less Catholic, however, my journey in the modern ecumenical movement has led me to this position. Although the point I wish to make in this article probably applies to all denominations with the necessary adjustments, I will mainly confine myself to Catholicism as it is the religious tradition I know best.

In what follows what I will do is give some background to the idea of *catholic* (with lowercase ‘c’) and then describes changing religious perspectives which form a background to modern ecumenism. A theological basis for a contemporary ecumenical response is then suggested, with further reflections of how the distinction between traditions and the Tradition can assist us and the need to reform personally and institutionally by going back to the gospel.

The topic under discussion is tied up with many other concepts of great importance. They cannot all be treated adequately, so topics like cosmology, ecclesiology, mission, salvation, *etc.*, will be mentioned in passing with whatever insights seem relevant to our topic. Finally it will be concluded that the challenge for Catholics to be less Catholic and more Christian is a continuing and difficult one.

## *Meaning of καθολικός (katholikos)*

Pope Francis has certainly given Catholics some food for thought in his 2013 interview with The Jesuit Magazine, *Civiltà Cattolica*, in Rome when he suggests a reconsideration of the emphases within Catholicism<sup>1</sup>. A subsequent local cartoon suggested that some will be asking (not as a joke): ‘Is the Pope Catho-

lic?’ Indeed what is ‘Catholic’? At a recent liturgy I attended in a parish (not my usual), the congregation, in reciting the creed, had on the overhead screen: ‘I believe in the Catholic Church...’

In many institutions like universities, colleges, and Catholic hospitals, some Vice-Chancellors, CEOs/leaders have been preoccupied in recent decades with the ‘Catholic ethos’ and the ‘Catholic identity’ of the place, not the ‘Christian identity.’ It seems to have been, in part, a reaction to a putative watering down of the tradition caused by ecumenism. Some leaders want their institutions to be more ‘Catholic’. That sounds well and good in theory (one does not want to lose one’s tradition) until one inquires what is meant by ‘Catholic’. Often it can mean emphasizing some individual pet devotion or single aspect among many traditions.

The origins and history of the word, ‘catholic’ are worthwhile recalling to refresh our minds as to the meaning of the ‘I believe in the catholic Church...’ part of the Creed. In early Christian writings it is used to mean ‘throughout the world’ or ‘universal’, and at this time the known world was pretty small—mainly the Mediterranean countries. The phrase in Greek, καθ’ολου (kath’holou) means ‘according to the whole’, suggesting ‘universal’. Christians were present throughout the world, the church was ‘catholic’ or ‘universal’. One could pray for the universal or ‘catholic’ church.

Let me give some examples. In the second century A.D. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Smyrnaeans, says that wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal (catholic) Church. In the second century it was some-

times used to mean ‘orthodox’ in the sense of not heretical (hence held ‘universally’), and in the fourth century Emperor Theodosius I stated that only those who follow the same faith as the pope should be called ‘Catholic Christian’.

Today when we pray the creed we say the church is universal. We pray: ‘I believe in the catholic church’, not the ‘Catholic’ Church. It was as a result of the Reformation when many more churches sprang up, that the church with a pope in Rome got the title of ‘Roman Catholic’ Church with its current connotations.

All Christians today are in a sense united in so far as they are all baptized in the one Lord and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. This can easily be inferred from the Vatican II documents<sup>2</sup>. We can also remind ourselves of what is said in Ephesians 4:4-5, ‘There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all.’ If we think of the baptized Christians throughout the world, we have the catholic, universal church (‘wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal (catholic) Church’). Another way of putting it: the Roman Catholic Church is part of the bigger catholic, universal church!

### ***Changing Religious Perspectives***

For many traditional Catholics of the pre-Vatican II era, the meaning of ‘Catholic’ is closely tied to a cultural piety. With this piety went the adamant conviction that Protestants were wrong and Catholics were right.

The Church, which controlled salvation, was an hierarchical organization with priests and bishops enjoying a privileged position, dispensing grace and often controlling the spiritual lives of their parishioners. If Catholics stick with the above pre-Vatican II attitude there is no going forward ecumenically because there is nothing to learn, nothing to change.



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With Vatican II and the decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, the idea of the Body of Christ, consisting of all those baptized in whatever church, has been retrieved and reclaimed. The boundaries of the Christian Church, the Body of Christ, are not co-terminus with the Roman Catholic Church.

Another change of perspectives from Vatican II was that of interfaith dialogue. The teaching, from *Nostra Aetate*, that members of world faiths or religions (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists) should be regarded in a positive way and that they are capable of salvation, shocked some Catholics who believed they had the monopoly on salvation. Now the thinking is that Catholics might be able to learn something from these faiths too. The best of Catholic thinking has expanded like concentric circles, from focusing on themselves, to other Christians, to other faiths.

Further challenges to religious thinking has come in recent decades with the new cosmology and the new story of creation. This story makes humans realize how insignificant they are and their humble place in the scheme of things. They now see themselves as earthlings that have evolved from stardust and feel a certain exciting closeness to the whole physical universe. This widens our vision of who we are and our place in the story of creation and salvation.

All the above changes and challenges to our thinking, our intellectual horizons, has unsettled some while being inspirational for

others and giving them new and exciting perspectives against which to see life. The intellectual cultural background has changed in an era where the enquiring scientific mind has carried over into religious questioning.

### *Theological Basis for Today's Ecumenical Response*

What is our response to these new insights into who we are and where we came from? For the modern Christian let me suggest that our first response is that of awareness of our smallness and a feeling of humility with regard to our insignificance in the context of all creation. Given we are close to nothing as individual beings, humility is a good starting place.

Here let me suggest Phil 2:6–8 as a basic biblical springboard on which we can build a spirituality for an age of ecumenism and especially receptive ecumenism<sup>3</sup>. A few verses of this well-known Christological hymn, are worth analysing because of the insights they bring. 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But *made himself of no reputation*, and took upon him the form of a *servant*, and was made in the likeness of men.'<sup>4</sup> This expression, 'made himself of no reputation', is more frequently rendered 'he emptied himself'.

The Greek word *εκενωσεν* (*ekenosen*) is translated in various ways. The Jerusalem Bible has 'his state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but *emptied himself* to assume the condition of a slave'. The French word is 'il s'anéantit lui-même'<sup>5</sup>, that is, he made himself nothing (the verb, *anéantir*, means to reduce to nothing; annihilate); and in a German translation<sup>6</sup> the expression is, 'sondern *entsagte* seiner selbst', which translates as 'but he renounced himself' or 'he abdicated himself' (the verb, *entsagen*, indicates renounce, relinquish, abdicate). The idea of emptying himself, of making himself nothing, is the core of the meaning. He did not fill himself up with this

or that Jewish tradition, he did not puff himself up with a particular religious piety.

Rather than seeing human beings as lord and master of the world and rather than Catholics seeing themselves as sole bearers of the truth and salvation, the above new perspectives lead to a humbler sense of us as human beings, as earthlings on this planet and being recipients of God's grace which is offered to all but in different ways. The essence of this change in attitude springs from Phil 2: 6-8. One of the Pope's titles is 'servant of the servants of God', although historically this emphasis has been lost in the pomp, ceremony and wealth which have nothing to do with Christianity.

This *kenosis* theology could be central to Catholics becoming less Catholic and more Christian. Catholics need to 'empty themselves' of their Catholicism and open themselves to learning from other Christians (receptive ecumenism<sup>7</sup>) and re-appropriating the Christian message. In short they must become better Christians.

In the ecumenical movement one could apply this to all denominations. Thus one could say Anglicans need to be less Anglican, Presbyterians less Presbyterian, Methodists less Methodist, *etc.* and more Christian. Primary emphasis should be on being Christian and less on being in this or that tradition.

Catholics, as Pope Francis is saying, need to re-examine where their main emphases should be. Jesus did not go around seeking out the heretics. He did not go around decrying homosexuals or divorced people. Francis, for example, repeatedly stresses economic justice and care for the poor as priorities for Catholics (and we might add, for Christians), and he warned that the church has become 'obsessed' with a few issues, such as abortion, contraception and homosexuality, and needs a 'new balance.' That new balance is what I mean by being more 'Christian', or embracing the Tradition as we shall see.

The kenotic approach suggests as a valid starting point an emptying of self which is

applicable to all Christians. For Catholics it means emptying themselves of their peripheral religious customs and practices and a re-commitment to the core gospel message of what 'Christian' means and then, only as a second step, re-appropriating the Catholic traditions. For Presbyterians (for example) it means emptying themselves of Presbyterianism and a re-commitment to the core gospel message, and then, only as a second step, re-appropriating the Presbyterian traditions. In this way Catholics and Presbyterians will see themselves firstly as Christians and secondly as nurturing this or that religious tradition. In this way Catholics will become less Catholic and more Christian. I see this as a necessary stage in ecumenism.

Together with the above theological basis, ecclesiology must be mentioned. Without going into it deeply let me mention the shift back to mission. 'Mission' is not an additional task of the 'church'. The very word 'church' implies mission<sup>8</sup>. There has been a shift in ecclesiology from privileged centrality to the margins. It rejects a self-referential church. Pope Francis' actions are a good example of what this means. Action, mission, occurs at the margins. The purpose of mission is the wholeness, the *shalom*, of all creation. The order is God-world-church not God-church-world<sup>9</sup>. In this shift, church becomes relativized. After all, Mathew (Mt 28:16-20), says that when Jesus appeared to them in Galilee after the resurrection, he gave them the Great Commission. Jesus did not say: Once we have a church with a written constitution I will send you out.

### *Taking it Further*

Where does all the above lead us? The change in thinking and perspectives which came with Vatican II and modern cosmology, will lead us into a consideration of what is Christian and how religious traditions in terms of their particularities have developed.

Yves Congar has reminded us of the key

difference between traditions and the Tradition in Chapter 1 of his book, *The Meaning of Tradition* (1964). Tradition is 'the entire heritage of the apostles' or 'the very substance of the Christian faith', while traditions are those practices and customs which the church developed over time and in various places to meet certain needs. A closer examination of the distinction between traditions and the Tradition is the key to moving forward ecumenically.

Ecumenism implies an effort to reform oneself by going back to the gospels. Therefore a scrutiny of these traditions is required if the churches take reform as important. By pruning the traditions, by setting aside those traditions which have outlived their usefulness or where the historical circumstances which called them forth no longer apply, churches will align themselves more closely with the essence of the gospels. They will shed unnecessary accretions.

Traditions need to be seen in historical perspective which means seeing them as a reaction or practical response to a certain historical time and set of circumstances. Let me cite a few examples: the rise of a male ordained ministry in the second and third centuries was a response to the need for spiritual leaders in a patriarchal world. The creation of cardinals as 'princes' of the church fitted in to the world of kings and palaces in medieval times. The role of bishops and archbishops has mutated into that of bureaucratic CEOs and needs to be re-aligned in a pastoral way. The exclusion of the laity from the chalice at communion came about for logistical reasons in medieval times. The structure of parish councils and finance committees as currently described, may no longer be adequate regarding financial accountability and transparency.

The Tradition is obviously more important than the traditions. Basic Christian commitment is to the Tradition, not to traditions. This implies we know what the basics of the Christian religion are. The ecumenical document known as *BEM*<sup>10</sup> identifies some of these

essentials: baptism, eucharist, ministry. Other documents highlight other topics but they are all anchored in the gospel. Christians throughout the world are invited to say if what they find in the WCC document entitled, *Church: A Common Vision for the Future*, reflects their denominational understanding of the Tradition.

### ***Back to the Gospel***

Ecumenism is achieved by many different ways. There is no *one* approach which will solve all problems. With regard to doctrine and church order, much has been achieved in the last fifty years. Kasper has outlined these achievements in his book, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*.<sup>11</sup> In spite of the necessity of examining doctrine, this approach has the danger of being an intellectual pursuit and not bringing churches closer, though in practice it has brought many people together. Receptive ecumenism has the advantage of specifically aiming at encouraging people to value and learn from other churches which complements the kenotic scriptural basis mentioned above.

The reform of the individual and institution, through going back to the gospel, is also a critical step. Why is this so? The answer is that the more churches (and individuals) reform and go back to the gospel principles, the closer to each other they will find themselves. The road of 'return to the gospel' leads the churches on convergent pathways towards unity. For this to occur the reform movements throughout the Catholic world<sup>12</sup>, movements like *Wir sind Kirche* in Austria, reform groups in the USA (Call to Action, *etc.*) and groups in Australia like *Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Renewal*, *Catalysts for Reform*, *Australian Reforming Catholics*, will need to get support from the hierarchy and the rest of the church if the reform agenda is to gather speed. Currently these movements get little or no support from the hierarchy. At the

time of Martin Luther, the calls for reform in the Catholic Church were largely ignored. That mistake must not be repeated.

In harkening back to the gospel essentials in what it means to be a Christian, Catholics will become less Catholic and more Christian. It is a question of perspective. Placing too much emphasis on the traditions of being Catholic can stand in the way of seeing the Tradition in its full clarity.

The analogy of a blurred picture comes to mind. The focus needs to be adjusted to give a crystal clear picture with a high definition. The difference between traditions and the Tradition needs to be given high definition. Since the Reformation emphasis was placed on all those things (traditions) that made Catholics look different to Protestants.

One should add in parenthesis that in the early days of Christianity, the Greek East differentiated itself from the Latin West by precisely small traditions, for example: which days of the week should one fast? When should Easter be celebrated? Should one work on Sundays? Is sex permissible on Sundays? Should women cover their heads in Church? Can one eat the meat of animals killed by eunuchs?

The problem with the current state of the churches is that they place more emphasis on their own traditions than on the Christian Tradition. This is manifest in many ways. Here are a few examples: Planning a devotional evening on *Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament* on the universally accepted day for the *World Day of Prayer*; by not joining in Christmas Carols with other local churches, or not celebrating Bible Sunday together; by not joining in together with other churches on social justice issues where there is a common stance on the issue; by not coming together to pray for unity in *The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*; by not celebrating baptism with other churches, at least from time to time, to show that through our baptism we *are* the church, the body of Christ (even if imperfectly); by

preferring one's own devotions and prayers on days which are typically Christian. In short, by not applying the Lund Principle: 'Should not our Churches ask themselves ... whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?'

### Conclusion

Much has been achieved on the doctrinal level through dialogues with other churches. Now it is time to focus more on personal and institutional reform. The earlier considerations of this article lead us to take things further by making the distinction between traditions and the Tradition. Catholics need to go through the kenotic process of 'emptying' themselves of their traditions (not being puffed up with their

particular traditions) so that the Tradition can stand out in its centrality, importance and beauty. Only after this is done, can customs and traditions be re-appropriated.

To date, there has been, and continues to be, too much emphasis on 'own' traditions which poses problems among Catholics in overcoming attitudes of arrogance and superiority. The more churches go back to the gospels, the more they concentrate on what is held universally by Christians (*i.e.*, what is 'catholic') the closer they will find themselves to other Christians as all being members of the universal catholic church. The big picture will prevail over the smaller, more inward-looking view. Catholics will then be able to pray the Creed with conviction: 'I believe in the universal community of the baptized'.

### FOOTNOTES

1. *Vatican Insider*. Accessed 22.09.2013. [vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/homepage](http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/homepage)
2. The thrust of this is obvious from the following texts. LG #2 'He planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ.' LG #7 'For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (1 Cor 12:13) LG #3 'The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly in the world through the power of God'. RU #3 'For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.' RU #3 'Nevertheless, all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ.' RU #3 'Moreover some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.'
3. Paul Murray in recent years has promoted this approach to ecumenism. Space does not allow for further investigation above, but as receptive ecumenism is a relatively new area of interest, here are some of his writings: Murray, Paul, (2008), 'Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for our Needs,' *Louvain Studies*, 33, nos.1-2, 30-45. Murray, Paul, ed., (2008), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to*

*Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, (Oxford: OUP). Murray, Paul, (2008), 'Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 7, 279-301. Murray, Paul, (2011), 'ARCIC III: Recognizing the Need for a Gear Change', *One in Christ* 45, No 2 Winter, 200-211. Paul D. Murray, (2011), 'Expanding catholicity through Ecumenicity in the Work of Yves Congar: Ressourcement, Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Reform', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 13, no 3, 271-302. Paul D. Murray & Mathew Guest, (2012), 'On Discerning the Living Truth of the Church: Theological and Sociological Reflections on Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church' in Christian B. Scharen (ed.), *Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 138-164. Paul D. Murray & Andrea L. Murray, (2013), 'The Roots, Range, and Reach of Receptive Ecumenism', in Clive Barrett (ed.), *Unity in Process: Reflections on Receptive Ecumenism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd), 79-94. Paul D. Murray, (2013), 'Families of Receptive Theological Learning: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology, and Receptive Ecumenism', in *Modern Theology*, 29, no 4, 500-516. Paul D. Murray, (2013), 'On

Celebrating Vatican II as Catholic and Ecumenical', in Gavin D'Costa and Emma Harris (eds.), *The Second Vatican Council—Celebrating Its Achievements and the Future* (London & New York: T & T Clark Bloomsbury), 85-103. Paul D. Murray, (2014), 'Ecumenical Methodology', in Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Ecumenism* (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming).

4. *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, A. Marshall, London: Samuel Bagster and Sons Limited, 1967.

5. *Le Nouveau Testament*, La Bible de Jerusalem, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1960.

6. *Das Neue Testament*, J.Kurzinger, Kleinostheim: Paul Pattloch Verlag, 1968.

7. A helpful parish workbook on this topic is: *The Gift of Each Other: Learning from Other Christians*, 2013, Sydney:NSWEC.

8. The WCC have produced a document called, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013).

In recent revisions it was felt the need to change the title of the document from a previous version entitled, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, because to have the words 'church' and 'mission' in the title implied that mission had to be added to church rather than being integral to it. Cf. also, Michael Kinnamon, 'The Theological Basis of Conciliar Ecumenism', a paper given at the International Consultation of National Council of Churches and Regional Ecumenical Organizations, Melbourne, February 6-10, 2012.

9. Cf. Jeffrey Driver, 'The Emmaus Journey of Ecumenism', a paper given at the National Forum of the National Council of Churches in Australia, 6-7 June 2012, Melbourne.

10. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (Geneva: WCC 1982).

11. London: Continuum, 2009.

12. Cf. website: *Catholic Church Organizations and Reform Groups*.

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*'Our role [said Father Adalbert Franquesa, Prior of the Benedictine Community in the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur, Jerusalem] is to continue tirelessly to go around the walls of Jericho until the Lord brings them down.*

*We are not going to bring down by ourselves the walls that still divide the churches. This is the work of the Spirit, but the Lord requires from us that we never give up going around these walls, praying and singing His praise.*

*At a time when the old obstacles on the road to unity prove more resistant than expected and when new difficulties arise, it might be good to draw inspiration from this biblical image.*

—Fr Franz Bouwen, M.Afr. in *Hope of Unity: Living Ecumenism today. Celebrating 40 Years of the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur*, Timothy S. Lowe, Ed. p.107.