

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

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Introduction

What I offer you is a glimpse of how the Roman Catholic Church understands ecumenism, and why I think more can be done. I am focussing on Roman Catholic perspectives, but I also recognise our indebtedness to those evangelical and mission-minded Christians who were at the origins of the ecumenical movement during the last years of the 19th, and early decades of the 20th, centuries.

The Catholic Church was a slow starter in joining the ecumenical movement. Ecumenism did not fit well with the inept and harsh way the Catholic Church was dealing with what went vaguely under the name of “Modernism”. This was happening during those same early decades of the 20th century.

Then in five short decades we moved from non-participation to multi-level engagement, and to recognising that working for Christian unity is essential to being Catholic. In the words of Pope John Paul II:

Ecumenism, the work of promoting Christian unity, is not just a sort of ‘appendix’ which is added to the Church’s traditional activities. It is an organic part of her life and work and must pervade all that she is and does. (Encyclical Letter On Commitment to Ecumenism *Ut Unum Sint* 1995 (UUS) 20

Even the concept of working for Christian unity has changed. Hampered by the limitations of scholastic theology, we used to think that ecumenism required no change on the part of the Catholic Church; it was simply a matter of others “returning”. We now recognise that the journey towards full unity is a journey for all of us, and that we all stand to be enriched by it.

It actually matters

But we all need to be convinced that there is a journey to take, and that our present divisions damage us all. I sometimes wonder what the Apostle Paul would say to us if he were to drop in. After all, Paul was a champion of Christian freedom, had no problem accepting local diversity, and did not want to impose any greater burden than was necessary. Any yet, he had a very low tolerance for disunity. So obviously, there are differences that don’t matter, and differences that do!

Even after we have acknowledged the rightful place of cultural diversity and legitimate pluralism of various kinds, there are other differences that go to the heart of discipleship itself. We even give different answers to questions such as: what is necessary for salvation? How real is Jesus’ resurrection and his presence among us? How necessary is Eucharist? What is the relationship between personal faith and sacraments? How necessary is baptism? How necessary is ordained ministry? In what sense are the scriptures normative? In what sense is there meant to be real teaching authority in the Church?

To put it another way, can we imagine Jesus saying to us: “I don’t mind what you think about these questions, just as long as you respect one another”? Or, let us suppose that we are setting out on an evangelizing journey in the company of Paul, Barnabas and Luke. Can

we imagine them saying to people: “Whether you are baptised or not, celebrate Eucharist or not, and who teaches what, makes no difference to whether you belong provided you love one another”? As I understand it, we *are* on a missionary journey; the Church’s mission is to proclaim what God is doing in the world, - reconciling all things in Christ. We are called to be ambassadors of that reconciliation (2Cor.5:17-20). Can we expect to be credible if we have opted to live with disunity on questions affecting the very nature of discipleship?

It is not enough to say that the fullness of unity belongs to the eschaton. Of course it does. But the Church’s mission is to be a sign, here and now, of that eschaton – a sign of the reconciliation and the unity of all things in Christ. Similarly, it is meaningless to relegate unity to the realm of the invisible. The Church’s mission is to make *visible* what God is doing in Christ. And so our unity needs to be *visible* in what we actually believe and profess and do.

And, yes, it does require change on the part of the Catholic Church. At the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII memorably reminded the Catholic Church that the content of our faith is one thing; how we present it, express it, live it and nurture it is another. I shall come back to this difference between the “what” and the “how”; here I want only to make the point that it is the “how” that projects our image – what we look like to ourselves and to others.

After all, it was how things were being done – sometimes badly and corruptly – that precipitated the Reformation. Is it too much to hope that *how* things might yet be done could take away the reasons for our divisions? Is it too much to hope that this could apply even to the ministry of the Pope? “What was possible in the Church for a thousand years cannot be impossible today. In other words, Rome must not demand from the East more recognition of the doctrine of primacy than was known and practised in the first millennium”. (Card. J Ratzinger, 1976)

The Roman Catholic Church still claims that in it alone all the means of salvation are available (On Ecumenism, n3). This relates to the Church as institution – sacraments, ministries, doctrine. It is not a claim that Catholics always live the Christian life (of faith, hope and love) more fully than other Christians.

Above all, the journey towards unity changes all of us because we cannot remain unchanged as we converge on Christ. If the Church is first and foremost “the mystery which is Christ among you” (Col. 1:20), then it can only be transformed as we deepen our relationship with him. This has to be at the core of all Church renewal and the work for Christian unity. It is our relationship with Christ that seeks expression in our unity.

Conversion

All this suggests that taking the ecumenical journey includes (at its core) a journey of conversion. Fr Paul Courturier (cf Week of Prayer for Christian Unity) said:

The problem of Christian unity is, for everyone, a problem of the orientation of the inner life. Unless it succeeds in gripping, even torturing Christian conscience, what hope is there for resolution? We have all sinned. We ought all to humble ourselves, to pray without ceasing and to demand, indefatigably, the miracle of total reunion...however distant it may be...

How much unity?

In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II speaks of “the necessary and sufficient visible unity” and invokes the teaching of the Council of Jerusalem that “we must not impose any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary” (n 78).

So how much visible unity is “necessary and sufficient”?

The Second Vatican council anticipated this question by reminding us that there is a hierarchy of importance among the truths of faith. Some are more central to the mystery of Christ and the work of redemption than others. This does not mean they do not matter. It means that their meaning becomes clearer in the light of the more central truths and the whole.

The what and the how

I mentioned before the distinction between the content of faith and how we express that faith. Some idea of the potential for re-formulating, reshaping, restructuring and re-imagining the Catholic Church can be glimpsed in developments that are already happening. For example

- i) Official recognition that not all doctrines have the same importance implies room for a certain gradualness towards unity.
- ii) Inculturation will result in a certain pluralism, and Pope Paul VI taught that inculturation applies in the fields of “liturgical expression, catechesis, theological formulation, secondary ecclesial structures, and ministries” (Apostolic Letter on Evangelisation n 63).
- iii) The Second Vatican Council’s affirmation of human dignity and religious freedom will also have consequences for catechesis, faith formation, moral education, and the exercise of authority.
- iv) The high degree of uniformity and centralisation that has shaped Catholicism over recent centuries resulted from a defensive stance relative to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and Modernism. These no longer require that highly defensive stance. We can move away from uniformity and excessive centralisation.
- v) The image of the Church that resulted from it being focussed primarily on the roles of ordained ministries is giving way to a re-imaging focussed on what it means to become the Church through baptism. The call to holiness is for all, and all share responsibility for the mission of the Church. Ordained ministry is in the service of the calling of all the baptised.

Each of these developments, and all of them together, have huge potential to create a very *different experience of the Church*.

Dialogue

Moreover, all this is something we can and need to do together. I attach great significance to Pope John Paul’s willingness to involve the pastors and theologians of all our Churches to seek together the most appropriate way of shaping and exercising the Petrine ministry. (cf *Ut Unum Sint*, n 95). Shared seeking can lead to shared conclusions.

We cannot underestimate what can come out of dialogue. In the wake of an Encyclical (*Ecclesiam Suam*), Paul VI wrote during the Council, “dialogue” entered the thinking and

vocabulary of the Council in a decisive way. An earlier draft on the Decree of Ecumenism didn't even use the word dialogue. In the Decree finally endorsed by the Council, it was one of the text's most characteristic words and it became the aimed-for future characteristic of relationships within the Church, between the Churches, and between the Church and the world. (cf *The Church in the Modern World*, n 92)

“Seeking together” also deepens the journey of conversion. Standing, as it were, shoulder to shoulder, we look together at the Apostolic Tradition to which we are all trying to be faithful, and ask how well we measure up.

Ecumenical dialogue has recently taken a new turn in what has been called “receptive ecumenism”. Paul Murray explains it this way: in our various bilateral dialogues we have been used to placing before each other our beliefs, hoping our ecumenical partners would see why they are precious to us. Murray likens this to putting out our best china. Instead, he says, we need to show each other our dirty hands, i.e. come to each other for help in dealing with things we struggle with or have failed with; being willing to learn from each other. I believe this approach has huge potential.

I would add: there is more to share than just our problems. I am thinking of Pope John Paul II's reply to a reporter who had asked why – given that divisions are contrary to God's will – did allow God allow them in the first place;

John Paul's answer was

Could it not be that these divisions have also been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ's Gospel and in the redemption...?

Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise... *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Random House, London 1994, n 46)

In the Encyclical already quoted he says “Everything that the Spirit brings about in others can serve for the building up of all communities and in a certain sense instruct them in the mystery of Christ”. (n 39) And the Council's Decree on Ecumenism had also spoken of how we can be enriched by what the Holy Spirit brings about in the hearts of other Christians. (cf n 4)

This is surely another good reason for coming to each other, to receive rather than to give.

EXERCISES

1. Identify aspects of other Christians' faith that have surprised and pleased you.
2. Identify some of the ways we might learn/receive from other Christians.
3. Identify some of the ways we might expect the Roman Catholic Church to express itself differently as a result of (i) – (v) above.

A greater sharing

I suggest that the kind of sharing necessary for ecumenical progress extends beyond dialogue. We need to tap into *each other's experience of our common faith*. We need to discover each other's faith through the experience of being with one another in prayer.

My own ecumenical conversion is nudged along whenever I find myself in the company of others in prayer. Seeing their faith in Christ and their love for him, I am humbled, and am able to see more vividly the folly and sinfulness of separation. We really need to experience the pain of division to become more strongly resolved to overcome it.

I feel saddened and troubled by what I consider to be an excessively cautious and rationalistic approach on the part of my own Church (eg our response to the BEM document), and lost opportunities for more intensive and more extensive sharing. I base my claim on the fact that how any person, or community, comes to *articulate* what they believe is necessarily dependant on how they *experience* what they believe.

As I have explained in greater detail elsewhere,¹ in a general sense we accept easily enough that 'the less one has participated in the Christian religious experience, the less one is capable of appreciating the doctrines that articulate the meaning of that experience'.² But we are strangely slow to acknowledge the ecumenical implications of this important fact. The context in which the different Christian denominations perceive and formulate the meaning of their faith results from the different historical, cultural, social and theological environments in which they live their faith. And the less one has participated in their experience of the faith, the less one is able to appreciate what they mean.

There is evidence for this from an even older ecumenical experience. At the Council of Florence (1438–42) which had been called to heal the schism of the East and the West, significant doctrinal agreement was reached. But the agreement meant little to those who had not participated in the experience out of which the agreed formulations emerged. And so nothing came of it.³

ARCIC I had already reached the conclusion that 'some difficulties will not be wholly resolved until a practical initiative has been taken and our two churches have lived together more visibly in one koinonia.' (*Authority in the Church II*, Statement, n 33.)

Karl Rahner pointed out in the late 1960s that doctrinal differences cannot be resolved on the basis of intellectual comparisons of formulated teachings. In several of his writings, Rahner refers to a gap between the contents of Church's faith and each individual's own appropriation of it. Notwithstanding this gap, the individual is able to participate in the life of the Church. This is implicit in the Church's sacramental practices in the case of children.

It is also implied in the teaching of St Thomas that all the truths of the faith are encompassed by the act of faith, even though we only gradually locate them in the greater scheme of things and appropriate them.

¹ *Openings to Renewal*, Australasian Theological Forum 2011

² Chirico, P, 'Religious Experience and Development of Dogma', in *The American Benedictine Review*, Volume 23, Number 1 1972: 70.

³ cf Macha, J, *Ecclesiastical Unification: A Theoretical Framework together with Case Studies from the History of Latin-Byzantine Relations* [Rome: Pontifical Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1974], 122.

The point I am making is that what we acknowledge in the faith-life of individuals applies also to the faith-life of communities. When all is said and done, we acknowledge that the apostolic Church already enjoyed the fullness of Christian revelation even though the first generation of Christians could not have said all that we now say as part of our faith. In other words, such is the unfolding of faith and the ‘development of doctrine’ that those Christians who live sooner and those who live later (in a vertical line down through history) both possess the fullness of the Christian faith, but differently. What makes the difference is ultimately their different experience of the same faith due to the different historical, cultural, spiritual and theological environments in which they live their faith. Have we fully explored the extent to which this might also be true horizontally between contemporary Christians living within their different denominational contexts?

This is not to say that we can ignore or acquiesce in real differences. It is to say that because development in how Christians come to perceive and formulate the meaning of their faith depends on the context in which they live it, they can only come to a more common perception and formulation of doctrines through a greater sharing of Christian life and worship.

I accept Avery Dulles’ statement:

In the last analysis, I suspect there are no adequate extrinsic norms for measuring the validity of confessional statements. They cannot be tested against other biblical or creedal utterances by merely syllogistic logic. The norm must be to some extent existential. It is necessary to enter into the spiritual world of the other church with true empathy, and in this way to assess its declarations in relation to one’s sense of the Christian reality. Christian reunion therefore presupposes a certain sharing of religious experience on the part of believers of different denominations. (Dulles, A, ‘Dogma as an Ecumenical Problem’, in *Theological Studies*, 29, 1968: 412, 415.)

That is why I have argued (and still do) that Christians of different denominations need to discover each other’s faith by sharing each other’s *experience* of it – as a means of growing into it together. I am disappointed that the Catholic Church has not seized the opportunity to join with other Christians in using the Common Lectionary so that all Christian people could at least hear same the scriptures each Sunday. The Roman Catholic Church’s own *Directory for Applying the Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, (1993) – and which is Church law – actually calls for “common scriptural readings for liturgical use”!

Sharing in Sacramental Life

Even allowing for the more extensive sharing I have argued for, we still have to take seriously the divisions between us; we cannot act as if we already have sufficient unity.

This brings us to the matter of sharing in the sacramental life of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church’s position as been put this way:

It is a joy to note that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases, to administer the sacraments of Eucharistic, Penance and Anointing of the Sick to Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive these sacraments, freely request them, and manifest the faith which the Catholic Church professes with regard to these sacraments. Conversely, in specific cases and in particular circumstances, Catholics too can request these same sacraments from ministers of churches in which these sacraments are valid. (Ut Unum Sint, n 46).

The implied restriction on sharing brings into sharper focus our respective ecclesiologies and their differences. Roman Catholic ecclesiology emanates from the reality of “communion”, meaning sharing in the life of the risen Christ and sharing that same life with one another. So, for Catholics, ecumenism involves giving expression to *both* the reality of the communion we already share, *and* the reality of its incompleteness by reason of our divisions.

In Christian history, being “in communion” always had Eucharistic connotations. Eucharistic communion presupposed being “in communion”. The naming of the local bishop and bishop of Rome in our Catholic Eucharistic Prayers reflects this ancient practice of acknowledging communion. On the other hand, being not in communion precluded Eucharistic communion. When schism occurred in the early Church, the situation was sometimes graphically described as setting up another altar.

And so for Catholics, sacramental communion cannot be separated from ecclesial communion. Going forward for sacramental communion implies union, not schism, with all the others going forward. The aim of ecumenical work is ecclesial union for the sake of being able to share at the same altar.

The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches’ ecumenical practices are based on their sacramental understanding of the Church. Christians whose ecclesiology and sacramental theology are not so closely connected will see things differently. In fact, in popular thinking, their practices are usually thought of as the ecumenical position, and Roman Catholic practices as “unecumenical”. What we have in fact are two different understandings of ecumenism based on two different ecclesiologies. Whenever we talk past each other, it is because this has not been understood.

Mission

The Church itself, and therefore church unity, have a purpose beyond the Church. As Archbishop Rowan Williams puts it: the Church is what it is meant to be when it is a “living model of renewed social relationships depending on renewed relationship with God”. It is a communion that symbolizes the calling of the whole human race, and foreshadows it.

This outward orientation applies also to Eucharist because in Holy Communion we become one with Him whose body was “given up” and blood (life) “poured out” *for others*.

This way of being *for others* is something we can already do together, and acting together to create a world of justice and peace, mercy and reconciliation is part of our convergence on Christ, which brings us closer to each other. There is a two-way street here: the Church’s unity is needed for its credibility as an ambassador of the reconciliation of all things in Christ, and our working together for that reconciliation helps to unite us.

As I said at the outset, unity really matters. Our credibility, and the credibility of Jesus himself, rests on the unity of his disciples. What else could he have meant by his own prayer: “Father, may they be one...so that the world might believe it was you who sent me” (John 17:21)?

EXERCISE

4. Identify ways we might share in each other’s prayer life and worship within each other’s tradition.

PART II

The Roman Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What I offer here is not a history of the ecumenical movement in N.Z., nor even of the RC Church's involvement in it. Rather it is only a few reflections based on my experience as a Catholic participant. (1)

Following the Second Vatican Council, good working relationships developed between the theological colleges in New Zealand, and especially between Knox College, Dunedin and Holy Cross College, Mosgiel. These relationships fed into the work of the Joint Working Committee which had been established by the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Church's Commission for Ecumenism. As a member of the JWC, I soon learned to appreciate the integrity and the scholarship of theologians of the other Christian Churches. (My thesis for a Master's degree in Theology, Otago 1980, though researched in Rome, was moderated by the late Dr. Frank Nichol of Knox College.)

Experience of both bi-lateral and multi-lateral dialogues taught me the advantages of the former. In a bi-lateral dialogue participants are able to draw upon a tradition that has nurtured them, without the complications of trying to represent Christians of other traditions in the discussions. For similar reasons, I personally find it more 'real' experiencing worship in some other Christian tradition than in a service that has been developed to represent all Christians but is nobody's own tradition.

At national level, the Catholic Church in New Zealand has partnered with the Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches since the 1980's. My experience as a Catholic representative on the Methodist - Roman Catholic dialogue, both nationally and internationally, inspired and challenged me. But I can resonate with the respectful and honest comments made by the bishop who replaced me on the Methodist - Roman Catholic dialogue in the 1990's:

Our Methodist partners did not feel bound by decisions of the international Methodist/Catholic dialogue, nor even by positions which may have been espoused by NZ Methodists in the 1980 round of the dialogue. This left Catholic participants at times wondering just what was the point of our discussions if the Methodist Conference next year, or the following year, might disown views expressed by their "official" representatives at this particular session of our dialogue. Methodists prize their theological flexibility, and were not at all perturbed by this.....

(¹) In the 60's I was a Catholic representative on the NZ Inter-Church Council on Public Affairs; during the late 1960's and 1970's I was a Catholic representative on the Joint Working Committee of the National Council of Churches and the RC Commission for Ecumenism; in the 1980's I was a Catholic representative on the NZ Methodist - Roman Catholic Dialogue, and also on the International Methodist -Roman Catholic Dialogue for five years; in the 1990's I was involved with the formation of the Conference of Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand and was a member of it; throughout the 1970's and 80's I was a member of the Catholic Church's Commission for Ecumenism, initially under the leadership of the late Bishop Brian Ashby, whom I eventually succeeded as its chair, until my heart attack in 1990. Throughout my time as Bishop of the Diocese of Palmerston North (1980-2012) I participated together with the other Catholic bishops in our (mostly annual) meetings with the Anglican bishops. Very recently I again became a member of the NZ Methodist- Roman Catholic Dialogue.

Catholics speak of the eventual goal of the ecumenical movement as a “visible unity in faith and sacramental life in the one Church”. All Catholics share this hope, but Methodists found it threatening – and in their own case saw it perhaps as the absorption of a valuable local “Methodist” industry by some global “Roman Catholic” multinational. The Methodists were far happier to work simply towards “closer ecclesial relations”.....

Catholics fear that Methodist “openness” may inevitably finish by bending to current pressures in society. Methodists fear that Catholic positions are simply too inflexible to relate to the contemporary world...

It seems obvious that the unity of Christians could never be based on the kind of “flexibility” described here. But I also think the hesitations of those who fear “absorption” will only be overcome when the Roman Catholic Church can manifest the greater pluriformity that will result from the developments described above (Part 1).

The formation of the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa followed the decision of the National Council of Churches to discontinue its own existence so that its member churches, and Churches and Christian communities that were not members (such as the Lutherans, Baptists, Roman Catholics and Salvation Army) could become founding members of a new ecumenical body. In fact, the eventual demise of the CCANZ was the sadder because the National Council of Churches, which had a high profile in addressing social issues, had in effect given its own life for the sake of the new body.

The goals of the new body readily echoed the Life and Work stream of the international ecumenical movement. The 1925 World Conference (Life and Work) had said: “in the region of moral and social questions, we desire all Christians to begin at once to act together as if they were one body in one visible fellowship.” Some of the goals of the new body were indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand, and perhaps ground-breaking.

But the international ecumenical movement had two further streams: it was missionary, originating from the desire of evangelical Christians to overcome those divisions that impacted negatively on the Churches’ missionary activity. It has been said that the ecumenical movement began as a corollary to mission.

And, the international ecumenical movement had a Faith and Order stream. The 1927 Conference at Lausanne spoke in heartfelt terms of the need for the Churches to work for greater unity. Participants on that journey would need to be able to represent their respective Churches, and therefore be officially appointed by them. In other words, the ecumenical movement was a movement of the Churches towards each other.

The CCANZ never really achieved that decisive characteristic, notwithstanding its own name as a conference of Churches, and the inclusion of unity, and evangelism and mission, among its goals. It is one thing to engage with members of the other Churches; this is not necessarily the same as engaging with those Churches themselves. In recognition of this, the Constitution provided for representation of the Churches through officially appointed representatives. But membership was open to others as well, who came from a variety of interest groups, and any participants in the work of the new body could find themselves on its Executive even if they had never been appointed by one of the Churches. They could even be

deemed to represent a Church that might not have wanted to appoint them. And so at the coal-face of the Conference's work, Church-appointed representatives often felt they were dealing with 'ecumenically-minded' individuals, or with church agencies, or with interest groups of various kinds, rather than with other Churches.

This is not to question the importance of agendas and interests that deserved the attention of all of us. Working with one another on social issues is, after all, part of the ecumenical dialogue. But inter-Church collaboration on many of these issues was not new to the Churches. The NCC's Christian World Service and the Catholic Church's Justice, Peace and Development Commissions had worked alongside and with each other; the St Vincent de Paul Society had collaborated with CORSO in overseas aid, refugee re-settlement housing needs, etc. The NZ Inter-Church Council on Public Affairs had been a forerunner of ecumenical involvement in social, political and economic issues. Today the Council of Christian Social Services, of which the Roman Catholic Church is a member, continues similar work.

Inter-Church cooperation is always important. But the ecumenical movement is more than inter-Church cooperation: it is a movement towards a united Church. At this stage of the journey it needs to encompass all three streams of the international ecumenical movement. Even if not intentionally, the CCANZ's efforts to do this were undermined by different visions of unity. For many on the CCANZ what mattered was the unity of mutual recognition and the unity of cooperative action. Corporate unity was not on their agenda. The goal of a united Church (in which unity is not confused with uniformity), and a "communion of churches" (which is different from absorption), seemed too difficult to imagine, and therefore too difficult to aim for. But for the Roman Catholic Church, nothing less than full visible unity in that sense will restore the Church's credibility for effective mission, which had been the purpose of the ecumenical movement from the beginning, and which was the point of Jesus' prayer for unity among his disciples.

After the withdrawal of the RC Church and some of the other Churches from the CCANZ, the New Zealand Catholic bishops issued a statement (May 2001) re-affirming that the Catholic Church remains "irrevocably committed" to the work for Christian unity. In their letter they quoted from the ARCIC Statement":

Only a reconciled and reconciling community, faithful to its Lord, in which human divisions are being overcome, can speak with full integrity to an alienated, divided world and so be a visible witness to God's saving action in Christ and a foretaste to God's kingdom. (Salvation and the Church, n 30)