

CAN THE REFORMATION BENEFIT US ALL?

A ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

500TH Anniversary of Lutheran Reformation

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In a Joint Declaration after their historic meeting in Lund, October 2016, Pope Francis and the President of the World Lutheran Federation, Bishop Munib Younan, called on their respective communities and parishes to be “bold and creative, joyful and hopeful, in their commitment to the great journey ahead of us.” This paper is about that journey, and offers an explanation of why the journey must necessarily involve our communities and parishes.

INTRODUCTION

To know how the Reformation came about is important for all the reasons that history is important. As Dr Chris van der Krogt reminded us last month, this includes knowing why the Church in the centuries immediately before, during and after Luther’s life-time so badly needed to be reformed. However, five hundred years have passed since then, and a *new set of questions* faces us now. So let us move into the present, acknowledging that God’s life-giving Holy Spirit continues to work among all of us, and ask the question: is what the Holy Spirit does for any of us somehow intended for all of us? Hence the title of this address: Can the Reformation Benefit Us All?

I am suggesting that Luther sowed seeds that were meant to produce a harvest of renewal within the Church, and that this renewal might turn out to be *even greater* than what he had in mind.

REFORM

The need for reform within the Church had been recognized, and attempted several times, before Luther. But deep dysfunctionality within the Church had prevented it. A bold step was needed, and this is what Luther gave us. The ensuing rupture, which was not Luther’s original intention, and the subsequent splintering of Protestantism, represented loss for all of us, and did cause harm. The harm was recognized by those devout evangelical Protestant Christians who gathered at Edinburg in 1910, deeply concerned at how disunity among Christians inhibited the work of the Gospel. They gave us the beginnings of the ecumenical movement.

However, disunity was but the negative side of what was potentially a movement towards a better understanding God’s plan for human salvation. God’s Plan for our salvation is not easily derailed. It wasn’t even derailed by what happened on Good Friday! God’s involvement in human history,

illustrated throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, recurringly witnesses to the ways that God turns all things to our good; (Romans 8:28). So, too, with the Reformation. A reporter once asked Pope John Paul II why, if the disunity of Christians is so contrary to God's will, did God allow it to happen in the first place? John Paul replied, in effect, that God could only allow it to happen for the sake of insights into the mystery of salvation and the mystery of Christ that might not have surfaced so easily if the Reformation had not occurred.

LIVING TRADITION

The emergence of fresh insights, and better understanding of the Christian faith, are *normal developments* which result from the faith being lived, meditated upon, nurtured and celebrated. This happens within our respective Christian communities. It leads to the ancient faith being re-expressed in ways both old and new. This is what we mean by a living "Tradition", properly understood. (There are still fundamentalists of every brand who need to realize that "tradition" is not the freezing in time of any one period of Christian history.)

The ecumenical experience has shown us that this normal process of development which takes place *within* our Christian communities can also take place *across* denominational borders. In fact, facing our divisions turns out to be a catalyst for deeper insights and further understanding. And so the ecumenical movement itself can enrich us. Through that enrichment we are all being changed – to each other's better liking!

The basis for this was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council when it taught that

everything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of other Christians can contribute to our own edification; (Decree on Ecumenism, 4).

Pope John Paul picked up this theme when he said:

everything that the Spirit brings about in others can serve for the building up of all our communities, and in a certain sense instruct them in the mystery of Christ. (Encyclical *May They Be One*, 4)

EXCHANGE OF GIFTS

That teaching has given rise to calls for "*the exchange of gifts*" (Second Vatican Council; Pope John Paul II). This is a deceptively simple phrase. It seems almost innocuous, but its potential is far-reaching. It means that when we share with one another anything that the Holy Spirit has given to ourselves, and then each make that our own, we more easily recognize in each other the same Christian faith. As this process continues, the vantage points from which we look at each other change. Gradually, the organic unity which seemed impossible at earlier stages begins to look less impossible. When you think about it, it is hard to imagine that gifts of the Holy Spirit were meant to exist alongside each other in silo fashion.

My own experience tells me that the starting point for discovering what the Holy Spirit is doing among other Christian people needs to be personal and experiential. It has been when praying next to other Christians that I have been struck by how much their living faith, and hope and love and prayers are exactly the same as mine. This experience generates a strong sense of the folly and sinfulness of us being divided. That in turn leads to a stronger resolve to do something about it. I suspect that anyone who does not strongly feel the need for unity has not experienced the folly and sinfulness of people who are united with Christ being divided from one another!

THE FORMAL DIALOGUES

In recent decades, and around the world, bi-lateral and multi-lateral dialogues have been taking place among nearly all our Churches. They have borne fruit which deserves to be taken up by all our communities. But these dialogues, if they are not to be merely abstract, also need to be rooted in each community's experience of the other community's lived faith. I will go so far as to say that the process involved in the "exchange of gifts" needs to be broadened to include some degree of corporate participation in each other's faith practices. This shared experience of each other's faith is important because how any community comes to formulate a given belief depends on how that community has *experienced* that belief in its living faith and worship. It is hard to have a common understanding of what we have not experienced in common. We need first to experience in common what we will then be able to say in common. The experience comes before doctrinal agreement, not the other way round, which is why I say we need to venture into corporate experiences of each other's faith. (Forty years ago I wrote a thesis to that effect under the Rev Dr. Frank Nichol of Knox College.)

Whatever about that, the formal dialogues need at least to go behind the language in which we expressed our beliefs during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation controversies. There is an older language that belongs to us all. The formal dialogues have indeed led to resolving some significant misunderstandings, and to new ways of expressing our faith together. The work of the Lutheran – Roman Catholic international dialogue is witness to that, and one thinks of the landmark Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Some of you will remember that Lutherans and Catholics celebrated that Agreement in the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit here in Palmerston North in 1994.

There has been a more recent development in how the formal dialogues can be carried out. It emanates from the experience of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). Up until now, we have all been bringing to the dialogue the things we treasure and therefore would like to share with our dialogue partners. As Paul Murray (ARCIC) puts it: we have been putting out "our best china". The new development, which has been called "receptive ecumenism", involves bringing to each other not our best china but our bloodied and dirtied hands: we share with each other our unresolved struggles and difficulties, seeking each other's help. I think this way of approaching each other has huge potential. It's humbler to start with!

HOW MUCH UNITY?

What I have been saying so far comes under the “sharing of gifts” which helps us to more easily recognize one another as truly fellow Christians. Sooner or later, the question arises: how far do we let this process take us? For that matter, are we entitled to put *any* limit on where the Holy Spirit would lead us? These questions lead to the further question: how much unity with each other is necessary – taking it for granted that uniformity is on no one’s agenda?

Catholics need to recognize the understandable fear of many Protestant Christians that unity with the Catholic Church might mean “absorption” by it, and the loss of things that are characteristic of their own traditions and precious to them. And so a further question becomes: what changes within the Roman Catholic Church are possible that would dissolve this fear- the fear that unity might mean *absorption* rather than *reciprocal enrichment*? In what follows I would like to outline for you how there can be real change in the Roman Catholic Church without it being unfaithful to itself.

REAL CHANGE

First of all, as Pope John XXIII reminded us when he called for what became the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960’s, one thing is the *content* of the faith; another is *how* we present it, express it, live it and nurture it. The one same faith can be expressed in various ways. It is the “how” we live and express our faith that can change, in ways that make all the difference to how we see each other.

This principle extends even to how doctrine is formulated. When the up-dated *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was being promulgated in 1993, the then Cardinal Ratzinger said:

...no expression, or formulation, or cultural mediation, and therefore not even the best catechism, has succeeded or will succeed in expressing adequately and exhaustively the richness, depth and breadth of the Christian mystery, considering the historical, social, and cultural conditions of human understanding and expression of any age or place. For this reason, we are well aware of the structural and contingent limitations of this Catechism... It is not and cannot be considered the only possible way or the best way of giving a catechetical re-expression of the Christian message.

In other words, there is no way of formulating the doctrines of our faith that is untouched by the variations of different eras and cultures. Re-expressing the faith takes this reality into account. The variety and pluriformity this brings about will increase exponentially as the Church seriously engages the many different cultures of the world – a process that has hardly started. Of course, significant variety already exists in the various Rites of the Church.

Most importantly of all, the guiding principle governing all change must be the needs of the Church’s mission. Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, has put it this way:

... the Church will suffer the loss of its shape as it undergoes a death, and all the more so, the more purely it lives from its source and is consequently less concerned with preserving its shape. In fact, it will not concern itself with affirming its shape but with promoting the world's salvation; as for the shape in which God will raise it from its death to serve the world, it will entrust that to the Holy Spirit. (The Three Forms of Hope, in *Truth is Symphonic*, 190-91).

If the Church needs to shape its life and structures according to what is best for carrying out its core task, then equally it needs to *undo* shapes and forms that may have been useful previously but are less so now. Pope Francis is emphatic about this in his Encyclical Letter *The Joy of the Gospel* n.43. In that same Letter, he calls for a review of “everything” – all from the perspective of what best enables the Church to fulfill its primary task:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for the Church's own self-preservation. (27)

Still on the matter of what can change and what difference it makes, the Second Vatican Council reminded us that even doctrines we regard as true do not all have the same level of importance; (Ecumenism, 11). There is a ranking of higher and lower importance. This doesn't mean that any truth can be disregarded as unimportant. But it does mean that some truths are more closely related to the core events of our salvation than are others. And, as Pope Francis has said: “This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church's teaching, including her moral teaching” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 36). He was concerned that people's perception of the Church is distorted when truths of lower rank get more attention than the core truths of our salvation. And so he says:

... the message had to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. (In this way) the message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and so becomes all the more forceful and convincing. (*ibid.* n. 35)

It can also be asked whether it is even possible to have an explicit understanding of every Christian truth. It is arguable that explicit faith in every Christian teaching is beyond normal reach, and that this doesn't really matter because acceptance of the core truths of faith implies acceptance of whatever truths derive from them. I think this is acknowledged in our pastoral practices: e.g. we share the sacraments with children who have no idea of all the doctrines of faith. Why would this not apply also to adults?

Was it any different for the apostles themselves? What they knew had come to them as an overwhelming and transforming experience, but not straightaway as full understanding. My point is: if an implicit, pre-reflexive awareness of Christian belief is sufficient for unity *within* our Churches, there is surely some point at which the same is true for our unity *between* our Churches.

CHANGE IS NOT NEW, AND IS NOT FINISHED

Change is a normal part of life, in the sense that becoming fossilized is the sign of no longer being alive. In this sense, change is also normal in the life of the Church. In fact, it was so right from the beginning. For example: the very first Christians were Jews, and the need to accept that Jesus had come for Gentiles too involved for many of them a huge upheaval. It called for big changes in how they were to practise their faith - witness the Apostle Paul's arguments with the Judaizers. Their next painful discovery was that Jesus was not coming back any time soon. In some of the earliest Christian scriptures there are clear indications that they were expecting his second coming soon, indeed very soon. How one lives the Christian life when thinking that it will soon be all over, and how one lives that life knowing it is for the long haul, involve two very different ways of thinking and of living. From where we stand, it is all but impossible to appreciate how this difference must have affected those earliest disciples. Mercifully, it dawned on them only gradually.

Sometimes change is so gradual that it is not easily noticed. For the first couple of centuries, Christians were still a small, marginalized and persecuted community. After a while, living in that condition must even have seemed "normal". But then, unexpectedly, new opportunities opened up when the Roman emperors gave the Church the freedom it needed to take its place in society. Now they could do things differently. But then, centuries later, when the Church's association with the State began to compromise its freedom, the Church would assert its *independence* from the State by strengthening and centralizing its own structures of governance. This process of greater centralization and control continued as part of the Church's very defensive reaction to threats and perceived threats, including the Protestant Reformation, The Enlightenment, the various European revolutions, and what became known as Modernism.

This cumulative centralization of the Church's authority involved a corresponding diminishment of the autonomy proper to the local churches, - though less so in the East. It is this over-centralized, inflated role of central authority that the Catholic Church is in the process of rolling back in our own day. But, as Pope Francis is discovering, it takes time. Appropriate devolution impinges very much on *how* the Catholic Church is shaped for mission, and on *how* the Church will be seen - by Catholics themselves and by others.

There are other ways in which change is happening too: for centuries we have been used to a very clericalized way of thinking of Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council teaches emphatically that the Church is to be understood *primarily* in terms of what happens to us all through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, which constitute us as the priestly, royal and prophetic people of God; that we are *all* responsible for the mission of the Church; and that the laity carry out this mission, and grow in holiness, by being the yeast in the dough of *secular reality and culture*. These are ancient truths which, like the doctrine on justification by grace, had become somewhat smothered. The Reformation gave a needed jolt to the process of bringing them back into the foreground - to the benefit of all of us.

In similar vein, Pope John Paul II taught that the Church needs to be experienced primarily as the community of Jesus' disciples, implying that Church ministries and roles are secondary to the primary, underlying reality of discipleship. He also felt able to appeal to the leaders and theologians of the other Christian Churches to help him re-shape the Petrine ministry in ways that would be more acceptable to them. (*That They May Be One*, 95)

CONCLUSION

I started with the question: can the Reformation benefit us all? My answer has been based on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that "everything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of other Christians can contribute to our own edification". (Ecumenism 4). Based on that premise, the Council, and subsequently Pope John Paul II, called for the exchange of such gifts as any of us receive from the Holy Spirit. This *giving and receiving* brings about a greater resemblance to each other based on what the Holy Spirit is doing among all of us within our respective denominations. And because division among Christians is one of the chief obstacles to the credibility of the Gospel, Christians today recognize the need for this process to take us to *full integration and reciprocal enrichment*. In this context I also suggested that the changes required of any of us, and all of us, must be those that are required for more credibly and more effectively preaching the Gospel.

Of course, throughout all this I have presupposed that renewal in the ways Christians express their faith, live their faith, and nurture their faith needs to emanate from an on-going deepening personal relationship with Christ. It is ultimately our convergence on Him that draws us together.