

EVANGELISM & ECUMENISM

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Thank you for the invitation to reflect with you on this title. It might have been easier to reflect on either ecumenism or evangelism. But I shall respond by reflecting directly on the relationship between ecumenism and evangelism. Reflecting on the relationship between them is, I suspect, less popular. I am well aware that some tend to put the whole question of visible unity into the too hard basket. Some would settle for co-existence and co-operation. Certainly, we need to work together. But to leave it at that is to acquiesce in our divisions, and so to perpetuate them. Not only does that do nothing for ecumenism, it does nothing for evangelism.

Obviously, no single image of the Church is complete on its own, but there is one that is central and upon which we might all agree, viz. the Church as the community of Jesus' disciples. It is an image that is Christ-centred. Moreover, discipleship is a relationship with him that can always grow more, and so this image allows for our human weakness. Let us use it for our reflection on the relationship between ecumenism and evangelism.

On the premise that we are all his disciples, and on an equal footing with one another, let us gently challenge ourselves and one another. Given that being formed after the mind and heart of Christ is of the essence of discipleship, let us ask ourselves: "Can a community of his disciples ultimately consist of separate groups holding antithetical positions even on major questions concerning what he wants of us"?

I mean questions that transcend cultural diversity and legitimate pluralism, such as

- what is necessary for salvation?
- what is the relationship between personal faith and sacraments?
- how real is his resurrection and his presence among us?
- how necessary is Eucharist?
- how necessary is baptism?
- how necessary is ordination?
- in what sense are the scriptures normative?
- in what sense is there meant to be real teaching authority in the Church?

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"? Let us do an exercise in our imagination: we see ourselves around Jesus; we appreciate his company and it enhances our appreciation of each other. Now, let us put each of those questions to him, asking if it matters or not whether we believe the same.....

Let us put ourselves, in imagination, in the company of Paul, Barnabas and Luke on an evangelising journey. Can we imagine them saying to us: "Whether you are baptised or not, celebrate Eucharist or not, or who teaches what, makes no difference to whether you belong"? Well, as I understand it, we are on a missionary journey, and it is the same as that of the first disciples. I put it to you that our credibility - indeed the credibility of Jesus' own mission (cf Jn. 17: 20,21) - is the issue. Unity, or the lack of it, impacts on evangelism.

If our mission, the Church's mission, is to proclaim what God is doing in the world, and if what God is doing is reconciling, uniting all things in Christ, and making us ambassadors of that reconciliation, (2 Cor. 5: 17-20), can we expect to be credible if unity among ourselves isn't even on the agenda?

Can we plead that the fullness of unity belongs to the eschaton? Of course it does. But isn't the Church's mission to be a sign, here and now, of the eschaton, the kingdom, that we preach? - 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.

Let us indeed work for the wider oikoumene in which all things are reconciled. But working for it means witnessing to it - being a sign!

And so, for the sake of credible evangelism, the unity of believers needs to be made

visible

- in what we actually believe and profess;
- in the sacraments of unity, reconciliation, healing and ministry, and
- in obedience to whatever teaching authority Christ intended for identifying the faith that makes us his disciples.

Let me now share with you my reasons for believing that greater unity is not an unrealistic hope. I offer you a picture, in 3-D so to speak, of what it means to be Church:

1. The soul of being Church

This is Christ's own life in us. This "communion" of life, or sharing in God's life, is what we already have in common, and is indeed greater than our divisions. It reaches outwards into all the ways that love and mercy and justice manifest God's life in us.

2. The body and blood of being Church

Our koinonia of life and love is still a life of faith, and so it seeks expression in a united profession of faith and in sharing the same ministries and sacraments intended for nurturing that faith. On this point, I respectfully say to you all: don't be afraid to explore the history of how we were united before our divisions.

3. The historicity, shapes and forms of being Church

My point here is that how our beliefs are formulated, how sacraments are celebrated, and how ministries are lived and carried out, can change, and that the shape and form of things can be decisive for whether or not we accept the faith and its sacraments and ministries.

The danger for Roman Catholics is that because we believe we have preserved doctrine, sacraments and ministries intact, we can easily assume that ecumenism is not our problem.

The danger for other Christians is that it is difficult to visualize, and therefore easy to

under-estimate, how far even Roman Catholicism can be re-imaged, re-shaped and re-expressed at the level of how beliefs are formulated, how sacraments are celebrated, and how ministries are carried out. The content of our faith is one thing; how we say it, profess it, live it, nurture it and minister to it, is another.

After all, it was how these 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?

Consider, too, as the present Pope has acknowledged, it is the ministry of the Pope that constitutes, for many Christians, the biggest obstacle to unity. And yet the ministry of Pope John XXIII turned heads in a way that at the time was nothing short of dramatic. Did he change Catholic belief concerning the role of the Pope, or did he just change the way of doing things - and only begin to at that? In his recent encyclical, the present Pope acknowledges the need to find a way of exercising his ministry that is open to the present situation, and calls on other churches to help him find it!

You can see why the erstwhile slogan "return to Rome" was naive: it didn't count on what I have said here concerning historicity. Historically, "Rome" can mean different things, different experiences of Church. The essence of the Petrine ministry is that ministry which was entrusted by Christ to Peter, and which the apostolic Church wrote into its scriptures after Peter himself was already dead! That is what the Petrine ministry is meant to symbolise and perpetuate, and is part of our acceptance of those scriptures.

How, then, might change affect the shapes and forms and historicity of Roman Catholicism, given that it can never compromise on the content of its faith? I shall suggest examples.

1. The possibility of finding new ways of expressing the ancient faith, and ways that don't depend entirely on the language of our divided past, has been clearly acknowledged by the present Pope. This process is actually happening - notwithstanding any occasional hiccup or momentary slip in the gear box.

2. Don't presume that the high degree of uniformity and centrality that characterized the historical shape of Catholicism over recent centuries is the only way things can be. It resulted from extraordinary circumstances, and what is happening now is a massive, albeit gradual, return to the more normal circumstances which allow for plurality and decentralisation. Collegial responsibility for the universal Church is one aspect of this shift, and is still only finding its feet.
3. The image of Church that has focused predominantly around the roles of bishops, priests and religious was but a partial image. We are now in the process of a massive re-focusing, re-definition and re-imagining of Church around baptism, confirmation and eucharist. The downstream effects of this shift of focus and this greater sharing of responsibility will touch many aspects of Church life.
4. Don't underestimate the far-reaching effects of inculturation, which is really only starting. Pope Paul VI predicted that it will create diversity affecting the Church's "liturgical expression, catechising, theological formulations, secondary ecclesial structures, and ministries" (Evangelisation, n. 63). It is impossible to imagine how this will impact on people's experience of the Church, except to say that the more truly we inculturate the gospel, the more truly it will be the gospel that people experience in the ways most natural to them.
5. Don't underestimate the implications, yet to be unfolded, of that deeper respect for personhood that was so dramatically and decisively endorsed in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom. I'm sure you won't be holding your breaths expecting the Catholic Church to say that right and wrong are whatever the individual person thinks are right or wrong, or that right and wrong are decided by what a given majority happens to think at a particular time, or that something is right just because the individual exercised his/her choice. It could be salutary for all of us to examine how far our thinking has been influenced by the ideologies of moral relativism, subjectivism and individualism. On the other hand, fuller recognition of personhood will impinge on many aspects of theology and catechesis and faith formation in ways that are still in front of us.

6. Don't underestimate the Roman Catholic Church's very strong and cohesively structured efforts to bring religious faith and "secular" activities into closer relationship. That too will impact on people's experience of the Church. Haven't we all been damaged by the privatisation of faith?
7. Lastly, and above all, don't underestimate what happens to Christians as they converge more closely on Christ. This is what continuing conversion means for all of us, and it is the natural dynamic of discipleship taken seriously.

These, then, are some of the ways in which real change can make a real difference to how the Catholic Church might be perceived and experienced without any change to the essential content of its faith, sacraments and ministries. They give us reason for believing that visible unity is not to be lightly given up on, but worked for.

Indeed, can we afford not to work for that unity which belongs to discipleship and is integral to the Church's mission of being a sign of what God is doing? It means, of course, that we cannot act as if our divisions didn't need to be resolved; as if we were already sufficiently one. In fact, our commitment to unity will lack depth if we are not willing to accept the pain of disunity, - the pain we allow ourselves to experience when we come really close to one another in circumstances which reveal our shared love for Christ. That sense of dismay over what still divides us, is what we need to experience because it can deepen our resolve to work for real unity.

In some ways, the world in which we need to be credible has moved far away from us. The Second Vatican Council acknowledged that we Christians must accept some responsibility for the origins of atheism; research has shown that our country is probably the most secularised in the world. Often we seem only to deal with the symptoms. E.g., we argue over whether shops should be open on Easter Sunday, but the discussion seems unrelated to any liturgical context. There was a time when the whole world stood still, as it were, on the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, remembering, poised and waiting. Today, people don't even know the difference between Holy Week and Easter Week. How could they if Christians themselves are no longer rooted in the

liturgy and the liturgical seasons? Why is it that in one town in my diocese, the local congregation of the AOG all come to the Catholic Church to celebrate Christmas? The sola scriptura formula never was sufficiently incarnational!

While Roman Catholics journey and search in ways I have referred to, there are others who seek to recover what was lost through the marginalisation of the liturgy and the relegation even of the Eucharist to a secondary place. Others again look for ways of teaching the faith that are not "an uncertain sound" (1 Cor. 14:8). Others rejoice in the rediscovery of spiritual retreats and other such things that once were called "Popish". As we journey in any of these ways, may we not be afraid to look back at our common heritage.

In a recent interview, subsequently published under the title "Crossing the Threshold of Hope", Pope John Paul II acknowledged very honestly that in the mystery of God's ways important insights and developments may have surfaced as a result of the Reformation that might not have surfaced so easily otherwise. It think we can also modestly acknowledge that whatever strengths and whatever vitality the Roman Catholic Church might be rightly credited with today, these were once the common property of all Christians. And, as there is a season for all things, this might be the time to bring all these things together again.

