

CAN THE REFORMATION BENEFIT US ALL?

A ROMAN CATHHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

500TH Anniversary of Lutheran Reformation

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INTRODUCTION

To know how the Reformation came about is important for all the reasons that history is important. But 500 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 eventually be even greater than what he had in mind.

REFORM

The need for reform within the Church had been recognized, and attempted, 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, and giving us the beginnings of the ecumenical movement.

However, disunity was but the negative side of what was nevertheless a movement towards better understanding God's plan for human salvation. That Plan was not derailed even by what happened on Good Friday. Salvation History recurrently witnesses to the ways that God turns all things to our good; (Romans 8:28). 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 our 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 Christians 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 followed upon this 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, we become more like one another, and more easily recognize in each other the same Christian faith. As the 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, hope and love 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! (Bishops normally delegate ecumenical work to others, and so they too can miss out on the personal experience that leads to those convictions!)

THE FORMAL DIALOGUES

The formal dialogues between the Christian churches, if they are not to be merely abstract, also need to be rooted in each community’s experience of the other community’s 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 it 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. This 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 International Lutheran – Roman Catholic 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, emanating from the experience of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission. 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 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? Are we entitled to put a 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: in what ways can the Roman Catholic Church change that would dissolve 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, 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.

This principle extends 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, how we understand the Christian faith can be formulated differently in different eras and cultures. The variety and pluriformity this will bring about will increase exponentially as the Church

encourages this to happen in and through 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.

Further, as the Second Vatican Council taught, even truths of the faith 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 others. (Pope Francis says this well in his Letter *On the Joy of the Gospel*, 35,36).

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 truth of our faith is beyond normal reach, and that this doesn't 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 to constitute unity *within* our Churches, there is surely some point at which the same is true for our unity *between* our Churches.

Still on the matter of change within the Church: we need to remember above all that the Church exists for the sake of its mission. As Paul Tillich, one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the 20th century has said: the unconditional claim of Christianity is not related to the Christian Church but to the events on which it is based, namely the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (The Church and Contemporary Culture, *World Christian Education*, 2nd Quarterly (1956): 41.)

An equally significant 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. n. 27).

Just as change is a normal part of life, so change in the sense described here is a normal part of the Church's life. Sometimes it is so spread out that it is not easily noticed. But recall: the Church's ways of doing things when it was still a small, marginalized and persecuted community gave way to other ways when the Roman emperors gave the Church the freedom is needed to take its place in society. Later, when its 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 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 Church 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.

For centuries we have been used to a very clericalized image of the Catholic Church. A far-reaching teaching of the Second Vatican Council was that the Church is to be understood primarily in terms of what comes about through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. 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 that primary, underlying reality. 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 we receive from the Holy Spirit. This process draws us closer to each other. 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 must be those required for more credibly and more effectively preaching the Gospel.

Perhaps it is appropriate to conclude by quoting the words of Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, President of the Lutheran World Federation, at their meeting in Lund in October last year. They jointly 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."