

Catholic Learning: Explorations in Receptive Ecumenism Ushaw College, Durham, 12-17 January 2006

Reflections from an interchurch family perspective

This is a very limited and personal perspective on the colloquium that took place at Ushaw in January 2006. The colloquium drew together an international group of some 150 theologians, historians, sociologists, ecumenists, bishops, clergy and laity to look at how the Roman Catholic Church might receive gifts from other churches, and what hinders this happening. My invitation to be a participant came via the office of the Association of Interchurch Families; the letter said that I was invited 'in honour of the work that you and Canon Martin Reardon have done for ecumenism in this country over the years'. Not for the first time, I felt that I (and the Association) was benefiting from Martin's reflected glory!

The occasion for the colloquium was the awarding of an honorary doctorate to Cardinal Kasper by the University of Durham, and the Cardinal was present for the first two days and delivered a keynote address on 'The Relation Between Catholic and Protestant Principles', besides taking part in the introductory session and preaching at the Anglican celebration of the eucharist presided over by the Bishop of Durham. Also from the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity came the Canadian priest Don Bolen, who has special responsibility for relations with the Anglican Communion and the World Methodist Council. He has been very helpful to interchurch families both in preparations for the Rome Gathering of 2003 and for the visit that an international group paid to the Pontifical Council in October 2005 for informal discussions. He shared an exciting session (alas too short) with Dr Mary Tanner of our own AIF Panel of Reference, and with [Dr Ladislav Örsy SJ who addressed our international conference at Virginia in 1996](#); their title was 'Good Practice and Poor Experience in Receptive Ecumenical Learning'.

In one sense the colloquium was a kind of follow-up from the project on 'Authority and Governance in the Catholic Church' in which the Association took part in the late 'nineties, culminating in a conference in Cambridge in Summer 2000 (see [Interchurch Families, 8,2 Summer 2000, pp.14-15](#)). Thus a good deal of attention was given to authority structures in the Roman Catholic Church and how change might be brought about. Another strand was represented by the work done on contemporary Catholic thinking by Dr Paul Murray, Lecturer in Systematic Theology in the University of Durham. As Director of the Catholic Learning and Receptive Ecumenism Research Project, the colloquium owed an enormous amount to his hard work and enthusiasm, for which all the participants were very grateful. In approaching the issue of structural and institutional transformation within Catholicism the ecumenical context is significant, he explained. If organic structural unity eludes us at present, a more modest way forward may be found in 'receptive ecumenism'. Thus we need an ethic of constant receptivity to how Catholicism can learn from, and be enriched by, aspects of Catholicity in other traditions that may be being performed there considerably more clearly than within Catholicism itself. Whereas 'spiritual ecumenism', he said, focuses in the main upon the individual's potential learning and receptivity in the context of deepened affective communion, the practice of 'receptive ecumenism' transposes this to the institutional level.

In practice, of course, it is not easy to separate these two, and without spiritual ecumenism we are unlikely to achieve receptive ecumenism. How do we tease out the relationship between the two? Besides, not a few Roman Catholic participants at the colloquium were looking at structural change without much specific attention to the ecumenical aspect. However, part of the immense richness of the colloquium was to be found in the multiplicity of voices that came from different standpoints and experiences. If only there had been more time to absorb all that was said and to chew it over together!

Specific references to interchurch families

There were a very few specific references to interchurch families in plenary sessions. One came from Michael Putney, Bishop of Townsville, Queensland, Australia. Those present at the [Newcastle International Conference in August 2005](#) will remember the couple who came from Townsville,

sponsored by their diocese, and Bishop Michael himself would have been at Newcastle had he not been with the Australian delegation to World Youth Day. He is Catholic co-chair of the International Methodist/Roman Catholic Dialogue, and as such spoke at Ushaw on 'Catholic learning and Methodism'. In response to questions after his presentation, he talked of the experience of ecumenical dialogue, and of the process of discovering a gift of the Spirit in the other that is always a gift of God – a gift to be received for the sake of unity. He spoke of the 'serene joy' that is sometimes the fruit of intimate experiences between people – which sometimes those outside the experience cannot understand. This may be a rhetoric that can seem unreal, he said, but it is important to state the vision, even if we can only live it in a very partial and sinful way. It was in this context that he spoke of interchurch families – the context of real experience that is a deeply spiritual reality. Interchurch families, after all, share an experience that is more intimate, and more permanent, than that of partners in ecumenical dialogue.

Dr Geraldine Smyth OP of the Irish School of Ecumenics, spoke on the 'Social-Psychological Factors Militating Against Receptive Learning'. Here again, it was in answer to questions that she spoke in passing of interchurch families as agents in local ecumenism. In parishes, she said, ecumenism depends on the parish priest or on particular people – interchurch families or others – who will take a lead. I found it encouraging that she simply assumed that interchurch families are people who will 'take a lead' in ecumenism at local level.

Unfortunately I had to miss most of the last day, and I only read the text of the American Jesuit Thomas Reese in the train after I had left Durham. His paper was on 'Organisational/Political Factors Militating Against Receptive Learning in Catholicism'. Here I found the following: 'While in the past, most non-Catholics converted to Catholicism when they married a Catholic, this is no longer true. Catholics are now just as likely to jump ship. It depends on which partner takes his or her faith most seriously. There are also a growing number of ecumenical couples who rotate between churches. This ecclesial indifference has not just affected those in ecumenical marriages.' I do not think it is necessary to apply the term 'ecclesial indifference' to 'couples who rotate between churches'! They can indeed be seen as demonstrating that both traditions are important to them, and they do not simply want one to be absorbed into the other, while at the same time wishing to share them with one another.

Gift Exchange

The metaphor of gift exchange was important in the colloquium. Margaret O'Gara, a distinguished ecumenist from Toronto, Canada, spoke of 'Reception as a Gift Exchange' on the first evening. Like Bishop Michael Putney, she spoke movingly of the experience of those who take part in ecumenical dialogues. Long-term dialogue, she said, 'provides a means and a foretaste of reception'. Yet dialogue 'is a form of asceticism that invites Christian scholars to enter into a process which may achieve no tangible success or rewards during their life time'. An interchurch family comment might be that the reward is simply in the being there, in giving oneself to this process, or perhaps better, to one's partner in a mutual relationship of love. Whenever I refer among interchurch families to the 'blood, toil, tears and sweat' aspect of interchurch family life someone always reminds me of the joyful and enriching aspect – and I have to agree enthusiastically!

Margaret O'Gara reflected that she could not have survived in this ascetical way of life without the friendships of Roman Catholic colleagues and colleagues from other traditions involved in ecumenical dialogue. They offer each other intellectual and emotional hospitality on the journey towards full communion. She quoted Fr Thomas Ryan (who did so much in spreading the interchurch family network across Canada when he was Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism) in his description of ecumenists as often having a 'primary home' in their own church communion but a 'secondary home' in their partner's communion where 'they have spent enough time to feel at-home'. Many interchurch spouses will recognise the experience. Margaret O'Gara called it 'the hospitality of mutual reception'.

An example

There was a lively discussion on talk of an exchange of gifts between the churches following a presentation on 'Ecumenism and the "Tribe"' by Dr James Sweeney, CP. The idea came up of a gift that cannot be recognised as such because of the way it is packaged and presented. Also, as someone said: 'I need to know your gift isn't going to be used to hit me.'

It was in the context of this discussion that Br Jeffrey Gros FSC, until recently Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical Affairs of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, spoke warmly of the British Bishops' teaching document *One Bread One Body*. While a number of us from Britain would have no quarrel at all with his appreciation of the high quality of the main text of the document, for many OBOB has come to stand not for this but for the norms at the end of the document. OBOB became linked in my mind therefore with a gift that needs a great deal more unpacking – and indeed, to some of us it has seemed something of a cannon ball. Interchurch families have been discussing it with representatives of the Episcopal Conference for England and Wales (at their invitation, which we much appreciated) but this has come to an end for the time being and there is to be no change for the present. Prebendary Paul Avis, General Secretary of the Church of England's Council for Christian Unity, lamented that the official Anglican response to OBOB had not yet received a reply; change is *so slow*, he said.

This would be an area where the experience relayed to us by Brendan Tuohy, Secretary General of the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources of the Irish Government, might well be applied. He addressed the colloquium on 'Factors Militating Against Organisational Change in the Irish Civil Service – Implications for Change in the Church'. In managing change, he said, encouraging a 'change of hearts and minds' is more important than producing sets of plans for implementation. Also, management today has to recognise that there must be openness, transparency, and accountability in the process of change.

Many participants focused on the centralisation of power within the Roman Catholic Church at the present time, and some gave the impression that all we need is for the bishops and episcopal conferences to have more authority. However, from an interchurch family standpoint, Rome has consistently shown a wider perspective and a more pastoral approach than that of our British bishops speaking as a body. We have been grateful for the possibilities opened up – by *Matrimonia Mixta* on the 'promise' back in 1970, and on the possibility of eucharistic sharing in interchurch families by the 1993 Directory. These are instances where Rome seems to have given a useful nudge forward towards change in situations where it might not have occurred otherwise.

A wounded Church

No doubt Catholicism can and should learn and receive something about communion and collegiality from Orthodoxy, something from Anglican comprehensiveness, something about lay participation and the connexional organisation of Methodism. It is important that we are open to be enriched by the gifts of others. But we always have to remember that we cannot remain content with the intermediate goal of receptive ecumenism. The unity of his disciples for which Christ prayed is much more than that. In his morning reflections Fr Philip Endean SJ constantly recalled us to confidence in the work of the Spirit; to our personal commitment to Christian unity (nourished by our personal relationships with Christians in other traditions – for interchurch spouses one outstanding relationship in particular!); to nurturing and cherishing the biblical vision and desire for unity; to assurance in times of discouragement; to living in one another so that we may live more fully in the transforming power of the Other.

Sometimes we think and talk in terms of putting together divided churches. Fr Ladislav Örsy gave us rather the picture that he set before interchurch families at the Virginia conference. There is only one Body of Christ, where the Holy Spirit holds together all the baptised. We are one. But the human historical tragedy is that the Body is broken – torn apart inside by internal wounds – wounds that have come about because of our human frailty. We all need healing. When each church recognises that, the healing process becomes easier. That is the broader canvas into which he fitted his thoughts on reception,

and the conditions needed for true reception. It is a picture into which we can fit that of interchurch families as a connective tissue that can contribute to the healing of the wounds of the Body.

In conclusion, I must stress that this account in no way does justice to the richness of the whole colloquium. If you read an account from someone writing from another perspective, you might well think you were reading about a different conference. But that would only go to show what an exciting few days we spent at Ushaw.

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