

SOME REFLECTIONS ON RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM AND THE CHURCH THAT PRESIDES IN LOVE.

A conference held at Durham, England, in January 2006 on *Catholic Learning and Receptive Ecumenism* gathered together about 140 practising ecumenists from Britain, Ireland, continental Europe, North America and Australia. Many of them regarded the event as a significant landmark in their developing ecumenical pilgrimage, perhaps even as a significant landmark for the Ecumenical Movement as a whole.

At the heart of the Conference was the concept of receptive ecumenism, developed and expounded in an initial paper by Dr Paul Murray of the University of Durham Department of Theology¹. Central to it is the belief that the Catholic Church and, by analogy other churches seeking the unity of the whole Christian body, should take pro-active responsibility for seeking out those positive elements in the life of other churches from which they can enrich their own life in the pursuit of an ever fuller catholicity.

It is still too early to say exactly how the concept of receptive ecumenism, so ably expounded by the principal organiser of the Conference, Paul Murray, will influence future developments in ecumenical theory and practice. Much reflection will undoubtedly flow from the stimulus given by the many main speakers and from the innumerable informal conversations at the Conference. The whole process may well be considerably aided by the steps taken in the latest report of the international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue, *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church*². In this, we read,

‘It is time now to return to the concrete reality of one another, to look one another in the eye, and with love and esteem to acknowledge what we see to be truly of Christ and the Gospel, and thereby *of the Church*, in one another.. Doing so will truly highlight the gifts we have to offer one another in the service of Christ in the world, and will open the way for an exchange of Gifts which is what ecumenical dialogue, in some way, always is (UUS para 28)³.’

In this paper, I want to confine myself to two matters on which the Conference stimulated my own thinking. The first is the extent to which the new terminology of receptive ecumenism helps us clarify a phenomenon that, nevertheless, has deep roots within the Christian tradition. I intend to examine this briefly with reference both to the Roman Catholic and the Wesleyan theological traditions, the two with which I am personally, as a Methodist long committed to dialogue with Roman Catholics, most familiar. My exclusive examination of these traditions in no way implies that the concept is any more fully latent within those traditions than the others. I look forward to scholars of other Christian communions identifying and drawing out the roots of receptive ecumenism from deep within their own traditions.

The second matter is the extent to which my own thinking, as a theologian within the Wesleyan tradition, on the questions of the unique claims of the Church of Rome and its bishop has been advanced as a result of the way in which the overall experience of the Conference helped me to crystallise certain ideas within my own mind. I have become

¹ This, and the other papers, will be published in due course.

² *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church*. World Methodist Council, Lake Junaluska, 2006.

³ *Ibid*, p.41.

increasingly convinced that the practice of Roman Catholic ecumenism since Vatican II has actually powerfully reinforced the need for non-Roman Catholic ecumenists and theologians to engage with the claims of the Church of Rome, in particular with the nature of the petrine ministry and the claim that unity ‘subsists’ in the Roman Catholic Church. That is not to say that all the relevant problems are within reasonable sight of a solution. The dialogue of Methodism with the Roman Catholic Church exemplifies that only too clearly. We have admitted the possibility of a re-evaluation of the petrine ministry by Methodists⁴. At the same time, we have agreed that there is a deadlock over the question of the presbyteral and episcopal ordination of women⁵. There is, I suspect, still an important debate to be had on the question of the extent of legitimate diversity in theological definition and teaching⁶.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, it may be argued that the key pioneer of receptive ecumenism (who, of course, did not use the actual phrase) was Fr. Paul Couturier. He stressed the extent to which the Catholic Church needed to receive, or perhaps, to use the jargon of ARCIC, re-receive aspects of catholic insight and practice that had been obscured within the Roman Catholic tradition of his times. He instanced the cosmic vision of the Orthodox and the biblical spirituality of the Anglicans and Protestants⁷.

His influence on the teaching of Vatican II was profound⁸. Vatican II affirmed the spiritual riches of the eastern churches which, in their own right, possessed independent apostolic origins. Since Vatican II, John Paul II has reaffirmed and intensified that affirmation in his encyclical *Orientalium Lumen* with its call to the Church Universal to ‘breathe with both its lungs’ eastern and western. The Decree on Ecumenism also praised the biblical piety of the reformation churches⁹.

The Decree on Ecumenism also made two strong statements which may, in retrospect, be held to legitimate the practice of receptive ecumenism. The first is to be found in section four.

‘On the other hand, Catholics must joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found amongst our separated brethren...’

In the following paragraph, we read,

‘Nor should we forget that whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian

⁴ In the report of the fourth quinquennium of the international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue ‘Towards a Statement on the Church’, para 58 cited in Gros, J.Meyer, H and Rusch, W. (eds) *Growth in Agreement*, vol 2, Geneva, 2002, p. 593.

⁵ see for example, the admission in the report of the fifth quinquennium of the International dialogue, ‘The Apostolic Tradition’, paras 96-97, cited in Gros et al, op cit, p. 616.

⁶ not an issue yet specifically addressed in the dialogue but one to which I drew attention in my commentary on the progress of the dialogue given in a paper at the Centro Pro Unione in Dec. 1999, ‘Can the Roman Catholic and Methodist Churches be Reconciled?’ and subsequently published in the Bulletin of the Centro, no 58, Fall 2000, pp 3-12; pp. 11-12 for these issues.

⁷ The standard biography is Curtis G. *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, London, 1964. See also my ‘Two ecumenical pioneers: Paul Couturier and William James Shrewsbury’ in Woodruff, M (ed) *The Unity of Christians: The Vision of Paul Couturier*, London, 2003, pp. 64-75.

⁸ In particular on sections 7 and 8 of the Decree on Ecumenism.

⁹ Decree on Ecumenism, ch. 3.

never conflicts with the genuine interests of the faith; indeed, *it can always result in a more ample realisation of the very mystery of Christ and the Church*' (my italics).

The first paragraph might merely seem to point towards a need for a form of re-reception on the part of Catholics of things that had once belonged in a living way to their tradition but which had since been forgotten. The second paragraph seems to go further in terms of acknowledging that the Holy Spirit can give genuinely new gifts of insight, within churches not in communion with Rome, which are however perfectly legitimate developments within the one stream of apostolic faith and life.

The second statement occurs within a paragraph on the practice of dialogue¹⁰. It refers to catholic theologians 'searching together with separated brethren into the divine mysteries', a clear implication of equality within this enterprise and to the way being opened 'for this kind of fraternal rivalry to incite all to a deeper realisation and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ'. This, of course, relates to the statement in section 4 that 'whatever is truly Christian...can always result in a more ample realisation of the very mystery of the Church', counteracting fruitfully that weakening of catholicity that occurs as the result of Christian divisions.

In his encyclical 'Ut Unum Sint', Pope John Paul II re-affirmed the ecumenical teaching of Vatican II and added a further positive nuance in paragraph 85, when he asserted,

'In spite of fragmentation, which is an evil from which we need to be healed, there has resulted a kind of rich bestowal of grace which is meant to embellish the koinonia'.

Perhaps less frequently realised and acknowledged is the extent to which the late Holy Father reinforced this teaching in other encyclicals and sermons¹¹. He was insistent on the process of reception, calling for the *Joint Declaration on Justification* to be fully received in both churches¹². He stressed that the great task of the third millennium was to make the Church 'the home and school of communion', an implicit nuance of which was surely the strengthening of the already existing albeit imperfect communion enjoyed with the other Christian churches and ecclesial communions¹³. He affirmed the importance of recognising the activity of the Holy Spirit, adding that He 'made surprising discoveries possible'. He was also quite clear that the Holy Spirit was at work in other Christian communities¹⁴. Clearly Roman Catholic theological exploration, if not always practice, of receptive ecumenism has moved on since Vatican II.

Within the Wesleyan tradition, the concept of receptive ecumenism may be said to be implicit within the practice of the Methodist movement from the very beginning and well before it assumed a separate formally ecclesial identity. Wesley edited his Christian Library, a series of texts drawn from both the Protestant and counter-reformation traditions as well as some of the fathers and spiritual writers of the early Church. All these writings were intended to help the Methodist people in the search for personal holiness and the spread of scriptural holiness through out the land. From the very beginning, Wesley was prepared to receive insights into

¹⁰ Ibid, sections 9-11.

¹¹ I have summarised some of his more significant statements in my chapter 'The Ecumenical Teaching of John Paul II' in *The Wisdom of John Paul II-A Summary*, CTS, London, 2001, pp 101-113.

¹² Ibid, p. 109.

¹³ Tertio Millennio Adveniente, para 43.

¹⁴ Ut Unum Sint, para 15.

Christian faith and practice from whatever age of the Church's history and from whatever ecclesial tradition including those which he otherwise regarded with a degree of suspicion; one remembers for example his saying that he could live with the deep superstition of the Roman Catholic Church on account of the holiness of so many of its saints. Wesley's practice reminds us that valuable receptive ecumenism can take place well in advance of fuller convergence in faith and life!¹⁵

The Wesleyan proto-ecumenist, William Shrewsbury, argued that the Wesleyans were the debtors of all, instancing the debt of the movement to Anglicans, Puritans and continental pietists alike. He argued that the distinguishing characteristic of Wesleyanism should be its *disinterestedness* by which he meant a commitment to receive truly fruitful insights and practice from other Christian communions regardless of their attitude to Methodism¹⁶. Alfred Barrett stressed the need of every denomination to receive from others in these terms

'A single Christian, yea, or a single Christian church, is a puny thing standing all alone, and does not see and feel and know *all* the Gospel, because the eye of understanding and the heart of others is needed for this purpose. Christ intended the soul of his people to cohere in order that, while they were mutually loving, they might mutually teach'¹⁷.

His teaching on the mutual coherence of all the followers of Christ resonates with the teaching of J.A. Mohler and, I think, with more recent emphases upon the development of the Tradition as coming in part from 'magisterial' teaching but also in part from the developing *consensus fidelium* at the grass roots.

A dynamic sense of the continuing circulation of love and insight within the Universal Church can be discerned within the teaching of James Rigg and Benjamin Gregory. Rigg disputed the Anglican insistence on the first four centuries, arguing that the Church's growth in understanding could not be limited to an arbitrary period¹⁸. Gregory argued that the unity of Church and humankind was not only 'the grand object on which God has set his heart and mind' but also 'an intuition of the human intellect, a not yet wholly defaced feature of God's own image'¹⁹. It would be interesting to relate this teaching to that of John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* on dialogue as 'an indispensable step along the path *towards human self-realisation*, the self-realisation both of *each individual* and of *every human community*'²⁰.

Gregory's emphasis upon unity was powerfully reinforced by the first great modern theologian in the Wesleyan tradition to be fully exposed to and fully receptive of the insights of the Ecumenical Movement and modern biblical criticism, John Scott Lidgett²¹. Lidgett anticipated much of the modern ecumenical consensus on unity in legitimate and reconciled

¹⁵ For a very thorough survey of the vast range of theological resources from many traditions embraced by Wesley see the article by Prof. J. Orcibal in Davies, R.E., George, A.R. and Rupp, G. (eds) *A History of the Methodist Church of Great Britain, vol 1, 1965, pp.*

¹⁶ Shrewsbury, W.J. *An Essay on the Scriptural Character of the Wesleyan Methodist Economy*, 1840, London, pp. 89-90, 288-291.

¹⁷ Barrett, A. *Pastoral Addresses*, London, 1849, vol 2, p. 371.

¹⁸ Rigg, J. *Church Organisations, Primitive and Protestant*, London, 1897, p *

¹⁹ Gregory, B. *Sermons, Addresses and Pastoral Letters*, London 1881, pp. 86-8.

²⁰ *Ut Unum Sint*, para 28.

²¹ The standard modern biography is by Alan Turberfield, *John Scott Lidgett, Archbishop of British Methodism?* London, 2003.

diversity and on the exchange of gifts though he did not, of course, use these precise terms²². He stressed the essentially dynamic nature of the growth towards unity, calling the unity presupposed by the author of Ephesians in his own time as ‘inchoate’ an asserting that ‘it can only be fulfilled and made perfect by the spiritual development which gives full control to the head’²³. In his famous commentary on Ephesians, *God in Christ Jesus*, he states,

‘The purpose of the Father is to reveal His love in the incarnate life of His eternal Son and to make possible the sharing of that life in a thoroughly filial relationship with all humankind... God has planted an infinite *receptivity* (my italics) in the heart of man to correspond with his eternal purpose to impart his own infinite perfection as the gift of His holy love’²⁴.

He particularly addresses the theme of ecumenical receptivity in his assertion that ‘the one life of the Spirit cannot be developed to perfection... in national or sectional communities’. He argues that all denominations speak ‘with provincial accents’, ‘which betray their lack of fulfilled catholicity’. He stresses that ‘such catholicity as belongs to each denomination, be it more or less, can only be preserved in so far as it energises in pursuit of more’²⁵. In other words, receptive ecumenism is integral to true catholicity. Related to this is Lidgett’s doctrine of the pastoral presbyteral ministry, that amongst its key central concerns and functions is a constant recalling of the Church to the apostolic vision of its universal and catholic vocation in reconciliation of all humankind²⁶.

Lidgett’s was a profound influence on the assertion in the British Methodist Deed of Union of 1932 that ‘The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ’²⁷. Another Methodist who contributed powerfully to the exploration of Methodism as a legitimate typos of Christian life within the Universal Church was the historian, Herbert Workman, who pointed to the many parallels between aspects of the monastic movement and Methodism and to other parallels with earlier revival and pietistic movements²⁸. An interesting advance in recent years has been the growing Methodist self-confidence that Methodism has gifts to offer to the rest of the Church as well as gifts to receive. In the 1930’s, the Methodist concern within the early Faith and Order Movement was to show where Methodism stood on certain ecclesiological issues that, broadly speaking divided the Catholic world from the reformation heritage. Little attention was given to such particularly Methodist emphases as connexionalism. By the 1990’s, not only were Methodists exploring the theological rationale behind connexionalism more thoroughly but they were also letting it be commended in dialogue as having potential for reception²⁹. This was particularly the case in the most recent round of the American Catholic-Methodist

²² For an analysis of this, see the excellent summary of Lidgett as ecumenist by Rupert Davies in Davies, R.E. (ed). *John Scott Lidgett, A Symposium*, London, 1957, pp. 183-210

²³ Lidgett, J.S. *God in Christ Jesus*, London, 1915, p. 264.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 220-3

²⁵ Lidgett, J.S. *God, Christ and the Church*, London, 1927, p. 231.

²⁶ See his ordination charge to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference of 1909.

²⁷ Text in Brake, G.T. *Polity and Politics in British Methodism 1932-1982*, London, 1984, p. 829.

²⁸ Workman, H.B. *The Place of Methodism in the Catholic Church*, London, 1909.

²⁹ The contrast can be clearly seen when one compares the two major British Methodist ecclesiological reports of the twentieth century, *Nature of the Christian Church* (1937) and *Called to Love and Praise* (1999). The former does not mention connexionalism; the latter gives considerable attention to it in section 4. For an isolated but interesting earlier attempt to commend connexionalism for possible reception, see Slater, W.F. *Methodism in the Light of the Apostolic Church*, London, 1885, p. 137.

Dialogue³⁰. Methodists are, of course, also facing the challenges that come to them from other traditions as to how they might, in a manner compatible with their connexional heritage, receive certain other ministries, most notably the eldership from the reformed tradition, the sign of the historic episcopal succession and (though the thinking has furthest to go on this) ultimately, the petrine ministry³¹.

An interesting and significant convergence between the Wesleyan and Roman Catholic traditions was recorded in both the fifth and sixth quinquennia of their dialogue. In the report on the Apostolic Tradition, the two churches talked of the way in which the Church as communion is ever increasingly enriched by the Holy Spirit as it penetrates the cultures of the world, receives from them and transforms them. 'What is handed on by its tradition in the form of memory acts as a leaven amongst those who receive it, who then enrich it as they cherish and pass it on again to their successors'³². In the sixth quinquennium, which dealt with the questions of revelation and faith, emphasis was placed not solely on faith as *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur* but also upon the *fruitfulness* of faith, of true faith as always productive of new insights and new forms of Christian thought, devotion and service, as in this a key characteristic of the outworking of faith within both traditions³³. In these two dialogue statements we see a beautifully balanced reception of each other's insights.

In this section of my paper, I have only been able to sketch out the thinnest outline of a Methodist position on receptive ecumenism. Much more work is needed particularly in the sphere of dogmatic theology on the relationship between the Methodist reception of trinitarian theology, the traditionally Arminian emphasis of Methodism and the question of receptive ecumenism.

Finally, I turn to the question of the ongoing evaluation of the ministry of the Church of Rome and its bishop. Within the Wesleyan tradition, there are four key sources of authority, Scripture, Tradition, reason and experience. I would argue that all four point towards a re-evaluation by all non-Roman Catholic Christians of the petrine ministry, though here I am primarily concerned with a Methodist re-evaluation.

The work of the last generation or so of biblical scholars on the sheer richness of the New Testament witness to the role of Peter is too well known to need detailed rehearsal here³⁴. I would merely add two points which have received rather less stress in the more recent explorations; Paul's emphasis in Romans 1:12 on his desire to visit the Church of Rome and Luke's stress in the itinerant ministry of Peter in Acts 9:32.

Paul wanted to visit the Church of Rome in order that he and the people of that church might be mutually edified. In no other epistle did Paul lay quite such a stress upon mutual

³⁰ 'Through Divine Love. The Church in Each Place and All Places'. www.usccb.org, 2004.

³¹ These have been discussed in the relevant dialogues, within the joint URC-Methodist Committee and within Methodism itself where the question of the possible reception of episcopacy was discussed at the time of the original Anglican-Methodist Conversations of the fifties and sixties, at the time of the proposed Covenant of the late 1970's and again in the context and aftermath of the most recent Anglican-Methodist conversations leading to the present Anglican-Methodist Covenant. The Conference will debate and decide upon proposals for the reception of episcopacy at its 2007 meeting.

³² Para 62, cited in Gros et al, op cit, p.610. It is instructive to note how this para echoes the teaching of Nature of the Christian Church, 1937, already referred to above.

³³ The Word of Life, paras 43-52, cited in Gros et al, op cit, pp. 628-630.

³⁴ A good summary can be found in Brown, R.E., Donfried, K.P. and Reumann, J. *Peter in the New Testament*, Minneapolis, 1973, the work itself arising out of papers presented to the US Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogue

edification; it is as if he already sees that church as having an unique role. Of course, it was the one church that Paul addressed without having previously visited it and that may account, in part for his desire. It seems already to have been a very flourishing church with many local cell communities, some Jewish, some gentile and this may have led Paul to think that it would, as a result of the diverse operation of the Spirit within these communities, already be a church particularly rich in insight into the Gospel³⁵. It is interesting that Paul saw this church, already existing, apparently prior to any ministry within it of either Peter or himself, in such a light.

The greatest of the classical Wesleyan ecclesiologists, Benjamin Gregory, himself drew attention to the significance of Acts 9:32, commenting that it illustrated his 'itinerant superintendency' of the Church, then, of course, still confined to Palestine³⁶.

Work on Tradition is also too well known to need rehearsing. There is now almost universal acknowledgement of the early emergence of a special role for the Church of Rome, though the exact nature, extent and understanding of this role is, of course, still subject to controversy, as is, even more, the extent to which that early role can be held to justify and validate certain later developments within the papacy of the second millennium³⁷.

Ignatius of Antioch speaks of the 'church that presides in love', Irenaeus of the double apostolic foundation and unique purity of the faith of the Church of Rome, both, however, without mentioning that church's bishop³⁸! In varying ways, the Roman Catholic dialogues with Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists have all touched upon the question of the petrine ministry and its possibilities for the ecumenical future³⁹. That there is a case to be addressed seems to be admitted by all the traditional ecumenical partners of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is when we come to consider reason and experience that the Wesleyan tradition has particular contributions to make to the debate. In terms of reason, one may surely argue that the Universal Church does need a ministry of focus especially in an age of globalisation. It needs someone to whom the leaders and faithful of the Church may turn in expectation of a fruitful lead. For Methodists, this issue has already been addressed by Geoffrey Wainwright in an article in which he suggested that the Pope should take the lead in proposing a statement of the essentials of the Gospel as it needs to be proclaimed to the contemporary world⁴⁰.

It is, however, most of all in terms of their understanding of *experience* that the case for a petrine ministry has been most strongly reinforced. Methodists do not understand experience as a totally independent source of authority but as a confirmatory one. Experience does not

³⁵ Also, as the concluding chapters of Romans testify, a church with certain tensions.

³⁶ Gregory, B. *The Holy Catholic Church*, London, 1873, p.43. Gregory's understanding of the petrine ministry is put in strong terms. 'the unity of the Palestinian churches with each other and with the mother church of Jerusalem and the apostles at its centre, was realised and strengthened by the itinerant superintendency of Peter who 'passed throughout all (Acts 9:32)'

³⁷ Two key works are Tillard, J-M. *The Bishop of Rome*, Paris, 1982, and Lampe, P. *From Paul to Valentinus*, Edinburgh, 2003.

³⁸ Tillard, op cit, pp. 51, 75-6.

³⁹ See especially ARCIC I, *The Final Report*, 1982, ARCIC II, *The Gift of Authority*, 1999, Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue *Facing Unity*, 1984, MRCIC *Towards a Statement on the Church*, 1986.

⁴⁰ See the essays by him in Puglisi, J (ed) *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church*, Collegeville, 1999, pp. 59-82, 'The Gift which He on one Bestows, we all delight to prove', and in Braaten, C. and Jensen, R. *Church Unity and the Papal Office*, Grand Rapids, 2001, 'Ut Unum Sint in the light of Faith and Order and Faith and Order in the Light of Ut Unum Sint', pp. 76-97. I have also addressed some of the issues in *One In Christ*, 1997, pp. 125-137.

establish theological truth completely independently of Scripture and tradition and certainly not in contradiction to either. However, it is the privilege of Christian people, in the providential dispensation of God, to receive confirmation of those truths that are clearly testified in Scripture and Tradition the most precious being of course the truth of our adoption. 'The Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God' (Rom 8:16). I would argue that it is the experience of the role of the Church of Rome and its recent bishops in the context of the Ecumenical Movement that presses the case upon the Methodist people.

Fundamental to this was the insight of good Pope John XXIII⁴¹. I would argue that Methodists can see in his total vision of *aggiornamento* or renewal of the Universal Church, for the sake of which he convened the Second Vatican Council, an impulse of the Holy Spirit analagous to that which two centuries earlier drove the Wesleys in their vision of spreading scriptural holiness and adapting the Church to the missionary exigencies of the Anglo-Saxon world of the eighteenth century. Methodists can also see in the globe-trotting ministry of his successor, John Paul II, a paradigm of that petrine ministry of universal itinerant encouragement to which Luke pointed in his brief reference to Peter's activity in Acts 9:32 and this in spite of certain elements of the late Holy Father's actual teaching from which they would still feel compelled to dissent.

Alongside the renewal and reinvigoration of the petrine ministry effected by Popes John XXIII, Paul VI and John-Paul II stands the overall commitment of the Church of Rome and the churches in communion with it to the Ecumenical Movement. Prior to Vatican II, the Church of Rome had failed to take its proper place within that Movement. At Vatican II, in one of the most impressive acts of *metanoia*/repentance ever to take place in Christian history, the Church of Rome and its bishop solemnly recognised the act of the Holy Spirit in promoting a movement that had arisen right outside its own jurisdiction and, to a degree, in opposition, at least in terms of the form it had then taken, to its authority⁴². This act of recognition on the part of the Church of Rome constituted a major act of re-reception of an aspect of apostolicity that had almost been lost within the Church beforehand, that is to say the apostolic function of recognising the independent action of the Holy Spirit working within churches that were not directly linked to it in full communion. This act represented a re-reception of the style of apostolicity of the Peter and John who had visited, and received into connexion, the churches founded independently of any direct apostolic initiative, after the first persecution in Jerusalem⁴³.

Since then, the Roman Catholic Church has been the most enthusiastic promoter within the Christian world of the Ecumenical Movement. It has engaged in a much wider range of bilateral dialogues than any other church, extending the hand of fellowship not only to the ancient churches of the East with which it coveted reunion even before Vatican II but also to Anglicans, to the classical Protestant Lutheran and Reformed churches, to Methodism and to the Baptists⁴⁴. It has consistently aimed to widen the ecumenical circle, beyond those churches with which it has rather more in common in order to embrace those that might seem

⁴¹ if I may be permitted a personal reminiscence, I should like to mention the effect that the sheer goodness of John XXIII had upon my late uncle, Leslie Carter, then himself a very senior Methodist local preacher and a man who had very much been formed within the pre-ecumenical era; my uncle, then nearing the end of his life and ministry as a local preacher, spoke often of the way in which the personal example of John XXIII would transform the relationships between the Catholic and Protestant churches.

⁴² The introduction to the Decree on Ecumenism speaks of the movement among the separated brethren 'fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit'.

⁴³ Gregory, B, *op cit*, pp. 41,50.

⁴⁴ The dialogues with the Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists have gone on continuously since the late 1960's.

furthest from it but which, nevertheless, it wishes to embrace on account of the common baptism and confession of Christ. Thus, for thirty years it has been in dialogue with Pentecostals. Most recently, it has begun dialogues with the Mennonites and the Seventh Day Adventists⁴⁵.

In all of this, it has endeavoured to prove, in the living experience of those whom it has invited to partnership in the Gospel that it is, indeed, the ‘church that presides in charity’, the church that aims at a true exchange of gifts, a church that is committed to receiving as well as to offering an exploration of the gifts it believes it has to offer. Many years ago, the late Fr. Michael Richards, one of the most creative members of the international Methodist Roman Catholic International Commission, assured me personally that there was nothing positive for which either the Church of England or the English free churches stood that could not be received within the Catholic Church to its very real enrichment.

The dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches is increasingly revealing the importance of the exchange of gifts and a genuinely receptive ecumenism. The most recent report of the US Catholic-Methodist dialogue highlights the extent to which both churches need to listen to each other, receive from each other and challenge each other in ways that will represent a logical fulfilment and enrichment of the two traditions rather than any distortion or contradiction of them. In his paper at the recent Durham Conference, Bishop Michael Putney, Catholic co-chair of the international Catholic-Methodist Commission, spoke of his immense devotion to the Wesleys and the immense amount that he had learned from them through the dialogue. The very experience of dialogue members both in MRCIC and in other dialogues has been one of being changed and enriched.

What has been true at the highest international level of dialogue has also been true at other levels. I can testify to the constant help and inspiration that I have received from Roman Catholic friends over the last forty years. It was a small group of Roman Catholic fellow-undergraduates at the time of Vatican II who first introduced me to the exciting developments then happening through the Council within their church. It was they who first awakened me to the potential fruitfulness of the Ecumenical Movement. Fifteen years later, the members of the Archdiocesan Ecumenical Commission in Southwark took my education a stage further⁴⁶. In the nineties came membership of the British Catholic-Methodist dialogue committee, followed in the mid-nineties by very fruitful contacts with Belgian Catholics⁴⁷. I also owe a huge debt to three members of the Society of the Atonement⁴⁸. In all of this, I have felt the warmth of those who belong to ‘the church that presides in charity’ and it would be ungracious in the extreme not to acknowledge that I see within that the Church precisely the same impulse to spread scriptural holiness that inspired my own fathers in the faith, and that on not just an English but a global scale.

Nevertheless, I am not so naïve to believe that all the great issues between the Church of Rome and the other churches are within sight of resolution.. In my own writing, I have

⁴⁵ For the report of the dialogue with the Mennonites, ‘Called Together To be Peacemakers’, see *One in Christ*, 2004, vol 39, no 3, pp. 80-142.

⁴⁶ I was Methodist observer on that commission from 1982 to 2004, when I moved to Bristol.

⁴⁷ I should mention especially Fr. Pierre Parre, former ecumenical officer of the Archdiocese of Malines-Brussels and Professor Joseph Fameree, who teaches ecclesiology and ecumenism at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve.

⁴⁸ I refer especially to Fr. Emmanuel Sullivan, sometime episcopal vicar for ecumenism to the Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, to Sister Lorelei Fuchs of Graymoor and to Fr Jim Puglisi of the Centro Pro Unione in Rome.

pointed to two particularly acute ones, the question of the authenticity of the presbyteral and episcopal ordination of women and the question of the legitimate extent of diversity in formulation of certain theological truths⁴⁹. I would also ask that the ‘church that presides in charity’ addresses further than it has so far certain issues of great sensitivity. The first relates to the reality of ministry and sacramental grace within those communities that it still cannot fully identify as ‘proper churches’. Vatican II implicitly renounced the old language of ‘absolutely null and utterly void’ as used of Anglican and other orders beforehand when it talked instead of a ‘defectus’ in ordination within the reformation churches and a consequent lack of the ‘full and integral mystery of the eucharist’ amongst them⁵⁰. Clearly, this was a move away from the old language of total rejection but it left unclear how such ministries were to be evaluated.

Cardinal Kasper has suggested that Vatican II gave too much attention to the mediated structures of the Church and too little to fundamental theology in terms of the nature of God. Would fundamental theology help us here? Our Lord said ‘if you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?’ (Luke 11:13) With this saying of Christ held in mind, might the current emphasis upon the epicletic role of the Spirit also help us. If, through baptism the Spirit is present and active in each believer and if He is also active, as Vatican II asserts, through their communities as instrumental in their salvation, is it conceivable that the Spirit will decline, as it were, to be invoked in the eucharists of the reformation and post-reformation churches? To say this would in no way prejudice the emphasis of Catholics, and, indeed, Orthodox and Anglicans upon the normativity of the historic episcopate for the Church and the providential nature of its emergence as a universal instrument of communion within the second century of the Christian era.

One might add the language of validity and invalidity is essentially a legal language which sits uncomfortably with the prior and primary truth of the universal and eternally faithful love of God.

The Catholic Church needs also, as my friend, Professor Famerée, insisted in his Durham paper, to revisit some of the more adventurous thinking of the fathers of Vatican II on practical ways of establishing a more equal relationship between the Bishop of Rome and the rest of the one episcopate of the Church of God⁵¹. This needs to be done in conjunction with the process of receiving the insights developed within the Anglican and Protestant churches into collaboration in synodical governance with other clergy and layfolk. The church that presides in love needs to let go and trust the *sensus fidelium*, to remember that its work is to equip the saints, both ordained and lay for mature and responsible discipleship and to follow the example of one of its greatest bishops in saying that its honour is that of its brethren, strong and mature⁵². With the greatest of respect, one urges the Church of Rome to receive more fully insights that have a common basis both within its own tradition and within more recent ecumenical consensus. Amongst the most important of these are the essentially relational understanding of all forms of ministry, ordained and lay and the understanding that advance in theological understanding comes not just from the ordained leadership of the Church but also from the insights of the people applying their sense of what is Christianly

⁴⁹ Bulletin of the Centro Pro Unione, no 58, Fall 2000, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰ Decree on Ecumenism, section 22, ‘we believe that especially because of the lack of the sacrament of orders they have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the Eucharistic mystery’.

⁵¹ Professor Famerée’s paper will be published in the proceedings of the Conference.

⁵² Ephesians 4: 13, Tillard, *op cit*, pp.190-1.

appropriate to new situations and from the insights of those who, lay or ordained have the charisma and vocation of theologian.

That work of mutual edification of which Paul spoke must continue. All other Christians must long to visit the Church of Rome, whether in a literally geographical sense or in the sense of visiting those churches with which it is communion, to the end that we all may be built up in faith and love and share the same pastors who will, as Wesley taught, watch over us in faith and love.

David Carter.

(paper originally published in Ecumenical Trends, vol 35, no 11, Dec 2006, pp. 5-11)