

A wider role for the Petrine Ministry?

In this article, I hope to look at the possibility of the adaptation of the petrine ministry, as presently exercised, in a way that takes full account of the offer of dialogue on such a possibility, as suggested by the late Pope John Paul II in his ecumenical encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*. There, he called upon the church leaders and theologians from communities with which the Roman Catholic Church already shared 'real but imperfect communion' to 'engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject', to wit, his ministry of service to unity¹.

Pope John Paul spoke of 'finding a way of exercising the primacy, which while in no way renouncing what is proper to its mission, is none the less open to a new situation'².

That there is a new global situation, which urgently requires a Christian leader of the highest calibre to stand up before all Christians and their pastors and solemnly declare the whole counsel of God for the welfare of the world that His Son died to save, is even more abundantly clear on 2020 than it was in 1995. What is needed is someone who can speak as we see Peter speaking in his first few sermons, as recorded in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

I am convinced that there is already a very real sense in which Pope Francis is fulfilling such a function, to the recognition of many Christians of other churches, even if not with any officially ascribed authority from their churches. Pope Francis spells out the basics of Christian discipleship, tailored clearly to our exact historical circumstances in a world the stability of which is threatened by economic injustice, environmental threats (I write towards the end of one of the wettest winters ever in Britain) and spiritual hunger and debility. In para 65 in *Laudato Si*, he puts it in a nutshell-each Christian must attend prayerfully and obediently to three relationships, first with the Lord, secondly with his or her human neighbours, last (but most certainly not least) his or her relationship and responsibility towards the rest of God's creation.

I write as a Methodist, who has long been engaged in theological dialogue, particularly with Roman Catholics. I am convinced that there is a deep consonance between the Methodist and Catholic traditions, which already existed long before it was much recognised in either tradition. We have long shared a strong missionary tradition and a deep commitment to the doctrine and practice of holiness in the belief that all Christians are called to 'press on to full salvation'³. We have also stressed the essential interconnectedness of the Church at every level. What Methodists call, at the level of communion and interchange, *connexionalism*, Catholics call *Church as communion*. We can each trace the modern roots of our developing understanding of Church as communion, Catholics back to Mohler, Newman and the

¹ *Ut Unum Sint*, paras 95-6.

² *Ibid.*

³ The traditional Wesleyan expression.

ressourcement that led to Vatican II, Methodists back to the experience of the first converts in their class meetings, to the watching over each other and the connexion in faith and love that so characterised early Methodism and which is still central even today. Behind both, of course, stands the New Testament witness to the common life in the body of Christ⁴. At the modern fountain head of each tradition stand, respectively, the work of Johann Adam Mohler, 'Unity in the Church or the Principle of Catholicism' and Charles Wesley's 'hymns for the society meeting and parting'⁵.

In 1873, the eminent Victorian Methodist ecclesiologist, Benjamin Gregory, wrote his greatest work, *The Holy Catholic Church*. In it he cited a petrine text, Acts 9:32, which I have not actually seen used by Catholics. It describes Peter as going 'here and there among all the believers.'⁶ Gregory interprets this as Peter's exercising of an 'itinerant superintendency' of encouragement at a time when, of course, the Church was still purely Jewish and confined to the Holy Land. Some may see this as reading back later Methodist practice into apostolic times but the fact that Peter, at this early stage, saw travel throughout the existing Christian communities as important in his leadership would seem to contain in miniature a practice and concern not unrelated to that of pontiffs since Paul VI, all of whom have seen travelling throughout the churches as part of their ministry. Gregory also speaks of the visit of Peter and John to churches founded in Samaria by the first refugees from Jerusalem, 'losing no time in recognising and connecting them' to the mother church in Jerusalem⁷.

It is extremely doubtful, given the circumstances of the time, that Gregory would have related his insight to the papacy of his contemporary, Pio Nono; moreover, most Methodists, almost up to the time of Vatican II, assumed that the Roman Catholic Church was in serious error on many key points of doctrine⁸. However, the insight of Gregory into the earliest personal ministry of unity remained for rediscovery and use in the very different context of John Paul II's appeal for dialogue.⁹

John Paul II's appeal did not come out of the blue, but out of a recognition in three key international bilateral dialogues that the question of the papacy and a universal personal ministry of unity could not and should not be avoided. The Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, initiated in 1966, was by the seventies exploring the subject and showing that the attitude of Luther, and even more of Melancthon, had not been as hostile to the papacy as usually

⁴ Particularly brilliantly described by the Anglican author, Lionel Thornton, in his *Common Life in the Body of Christ* (1941).

⁵ Mohler, J.A. (1825, ET, 1996). *Wesley's Hymns* (1877), esp. nos 478-539.

⁶ NRSV translation. Gregory, B. *The Holy Catholic Church*, (1873), p. 43.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.50.

⁸ See e.g. paras 20-25 of *The Grace Given You in Christ* (Methodist-Catholic dialogue report, 2006) entitled 'Early Methodist views of the Roman Catholic Church'.

⁹ And, indeed, was so used in response to it by Geoffrey Wainwright, world Methodism's leading ecumenist by the 1990's. See e.g. his essay 'The Gift Which He on one bestows, We All Delight to Prove; A possible Methodist approach to a Ministry of Primacy in the circulation of truth and Love' in Puglisi, J (ed) *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church* (1999), pp 59-82.

assumed in popular Catholic and Protestant thinking¹⁰. ARCIC, the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, had accepted that the Bishop of Rome was the only credible candidate for such a ministry should its scope be agreed by both communions. MRCIC, the Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue, accepted in 1986 that 'whatever is properly required for the unity of the whole of Christ's church must by that very fact be God's will for his church. A universal primacy might well serve as focus of and ministry for the unity of the whole of the church'¹¹.

John Paul II's proposal aroused initial enthusiasm and various provisional responses were made from a variety of traditions and churches. Various colloquia for considering these were held, for example, by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. In its 1999 report, *The Gift of Authority*, ARCIC made the suggestion that, even before the restoration of full communion, Anglicans might be open to a recovery and re-reception under certain clear conditions of the exercise of universal primacy by the Bishop of Rome¹².

By this time, however, the overall ecumenical climate was less favourable. Partly, this was due to other aspects of Pope John Paul II's pontificate which had seemed to many Protestants in particular as more authoritarian. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, reinforcing earlier teaching that the Catholic Church did not see herself as able to admit women to holy orders, seemed to set up an irremovable obstacle. It also obscured the fact that John Paul II was not the simple reactionary that many members of other communions thought him to be-much of his teaching at the turn of the millennium relates to the need to be able to discern and welcome fruitful new developments in styles of witness, service and spirituality¹³.

Quite apart from this, there was a concern amongst many Catholic ecumenists, such as Cardinal Kasper, as to whether most continental Protestants really shared the same vision of unity as did Catholics¹⁴. The welcome given by Anglicans to the last two reports of ARCIC II, in 1999 and 2005, was less positive than it had been to the earlier reports. ARCIC was, in fact, suspended for a few years.

The dawn of a more promising era ecumenically.

However, by 2010, there were signs of an ecumenical thaw. Some of the credit for this was due to Pope Benedict, who made a very successful visit to Britain in 2010. More importantly perhaps, there was a decided improvement in Lutheran-Catholic relationships as a result of

¹⁰ A very good study of the progress of this dialogue on the papacy is to be found in Wood, S.K and Wengert, T.J. *A Shared Spiritual Journey. Lutherans and Catholics Travelling toward Unity* (2016), pp. 3-33 and 197-208.

¹¹ *Towards a Statement on the Church* (1986), para 58.

¹² *The Gift of Authority*, (1999), para 60.

¹³ At this time Rev. Bernard Longley (now Archbishop Bernard) asked me to contribute a short chapter to a handbook issued by CTS on the teaching of John Paul II. I dealt with the ecumenical side of his teaching in such statements as *Novo Millennio Ineunte* and was impressed by the openness of much of it. See 'The Ecumenical Teaching of John Paul II' in *The Wisdom of John Paul II* (CTS, 2001), pp. 101-113).

¹⁴ See e.g. his *That they may all be One* (2004), p 23 where he makes a distinction between those reformers who wanted to renew the Church whilst maintaining continuity with traditional structures and those who wanted a different and more local and community centred approach.'

the very positive way in which Benedict spoke of Luther as a man of deep spiritual sensitivity and seriousness. Benedict had also spoken much earlier of ‘the life-giving value of the Lutheran Lord’s Supper’ in such a way as to suggest a more positive evaluation of the sacramental life than even Vatican II had been able to give¹⁵. Lutherans and Catholics, particularly in Germany, became determined to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of Luther’s famous 95 theses of 1517 in a way that would contrast with the recriminations that had characterised the previous centenaries of the event and pledge the two communions to a positive and mutually respectful relationship¹⁶.

The famous *Joint Declaration on Justification* which the Vatican and LWF had signed in 1999 began to bear wider fruit. As far back as 2006, the World Methodist Council had associated itself with the Declaration recognising that Methodists now saw Catholic teaching on the subject in a very different light from that of John Wesley who had declared the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, ‘the grand doctrine that drove popery from these lands two centuries since’¹⁷.

In 2019, the developing consensus between the ecumenically engaged Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church on the doctrine of justification received a further boost when both the Anglican Communion and the World Alliance of Reformed churches joined the three previous denominational signatories in accepting the Joint Declaration and affirming,

‘Together, we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works’¹⁸.

Almost simultaneously, the international Baptist-Methodist dialogue team commended the signing of the document to the attention of the Baptist World Alliance¹⁹. It is also recognised by all partners that though the old justification dispute has now been laid to rest, issues of ecclesiology remain though even here progress towards a degree of convergence has been registered in the multilateral dialogue on the Church originated by the Faith and Order division of the WCC in the late eighties. In 2012, it issued its final report, *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, registering, in particular, wide agreement on the trinitarian basis of ecclesiology and the widespread understanding of Church as communion/koinonia. In October 2019, the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity issued its response to *The Church*,

¹⁵ As Cardinal Ratzinger in 1993, in an exchange with the then Lutheran Bishop in Bavaria.

¹⁶ See ‘*From Conflict to Common Lutheran- Catholic commemoration of the Reformation*’ (2014), document of the international Lutheran-Catholic Commission. para 30 specifically cites Benedict XVI’s commendation of Luther’s serious intent. Chapter 6 lists five ecumenical imperatives, including that ‘Lutherans and Catholics should seek to be transformed by the encounter with each other.’

¹⁷ Sermon no 1, in the standard collection of 44 Wesley sermons, study of which is required of all (British) Methodist preachers.

¹⁸ *Notre Dame Consultation Statement*, issued March 2019, available by googling the name.

¹⁹ One of the eleven propositions agreed at the end of the Report, ‘*Faith Working through Love*’ (2018) see also my article in *One in Christ* (2018), pp. 259-284.

Towards a Common Vision, a response that was strongly appreciative of the degree of consensus reached, particularly on the two points just registered in this paragraph, whilst calling for further progress on others²⁰.

The Advent of Francis.

From almost the moment of his election in 2013, Francis brought both the weight of his office and a particularly engaging personal style to the enhancement of ecumenical confidence.

From his previous experience, first as auxiliary bishop in one of the poorest areas of Buenos Aires, Francis brought a profound experience of the needs physical and spiritual of the poor and marginalised, then, from his role as Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, a wider experience of the context of the churches in Latin America and the two thirds world. He also brought invaluable experience ecumenically in the links that he had begun to forge with Pentecostals, with whom earlier Catholic relationships had been poor. Determined to change the situation, Jorge Bergoglio had attended Pentecostal rallies, had offered to pray for Pentecostal pastors and had invited them to pray with and for him. His enthusiasm for charismatics, both Catholic and Pentecostal, has been an abiding feature of his pontificate in which both he and his Pentecostal brethren have been able to be at one in their common devotion to the Holy Spirit and belief in His transformative power in evangelisation²¹.

Already, Bergoglio had struck a chord with Protestants more widely than previous pontiffs. His election was acclaimed by an evangelical Anglican bishop of the Church of the Southern Cone, who said, 'this man is Christ centred and Spirit filled'²².

Much of Francis' understanding of the necessary agenda for the Church is set out clearly in his early apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). This document struck a particular chord with me as a Methodist. I could see the new pontiff wanting to do for the world what John Wesley had tried to do for England in the eighteenth century, to preach plain scriptural Christianity, to bring good news to the poor, to commend, as some of his earliest words to the world Church, the joy of faithful Christian discipleship, lived out in witness and service by ordinary missionary disciples of Jesus Christ²³.

²⁰ *Catholic Response to 'The Church- Towards a Common Vision'* (p.10) states that 'the first chapter (God's Mission and the Unity of the Church) 'stands for the remarkable level of convergence that can almost be regarded as a consensus...a strong framework for the content of the whole document.'

²¹ See for example his address to charismatics on the fiftieth anniversary of the Catholic charismatic movement, as cited by him at an audience for the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity on 28.9.2018.

²² Abp Venables of the (Anglican) Church of the Southern Cone. Vallely, P. *Pope Francis, Untying the Knots*, (2015) p. 94. He describes Francis as 'admirably comprehensive in those he included as he reaches outwards- he embraced everyone, from other Christian denominations, believers in other faiths, to those who were none of these'.

²³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, paras 2-8, where, quoting Zephaniah, he exalts in God's rejoicing over his people.

From the beginning, Francis has been preoccupied with Christian basics. It is instructive that he addresses the situation in the parish as the most basic unit experienced by ordinary lay Christians in worship, service and mutual encouragement in faith and love. He does this *before* looking at the responsibilities of the local church (defined theologically as diocese) and its bishop²⁴. Chapter 2 addresses the crisis of communal commitment, which, one may add, is perhaps even more severe now than in 2013, partly as a result of increased social isolation and reliance on social media rather than live human contact. Chapter 3 deals with proclamation of the Gospel, insisting that it is a *whole church* job in each parish. *All* are called to be missionary disciples in word and in deeds testifying to their faith²⁵. Popular piety is not to be despised, a point relevant to intellectuals and aesthetes in all Christian traditions who may be inclined to overlook its importance. It is the product of genuinely local inculturation and adapted to the spirit and ethos of each distinct community²⁶. Finally, excellent advice on preaching, and preparation for it, is given in a manner equally commendable to those called to preach in every Christian tradition²⁷.

Chapter 4, dealing with the social dimension of evangelisation, insists that ‘the kingdom, already present and growing in our midst, engages us at every level of our being and is directed, to quote Paul VI, to “all men and the whole man”. The key priorities are the inclusion of the poor and the dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good, ‘concerns which ought to shape all economic policies’. In this context, Francis calls for people of spirit, doctors, nurses, teachers of businessmen of spirit, who see their work and calling as a genuine vocation, designed to do far more for those in need than just for the benefit of the professional concerned. Such teaching tallies very closely with that of most Protestant churches²⁸.

Finally, in chapter 5, Francis refers to his call for ‘spirit filled evangelisers’, reiterating yet again his great faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to raise up such people, a faith that links him so closely with so many Christians of the other traditions. Reading Francis’ exhortations and encyclicals is a spiritual experience, profitable to all Christians, thus giving flesh to the ARCIC suggestion of 1999 that, even in advance of the restoration of full unity, both churches might benefit from the authoritative teaching of the Bishop of Rome²⁹.

I will not comment in detail on *Laudato Si*, significant though it is, save to say that here, on the environment, Francis’ position has the additional support of people of good faith from

²⁴ EG, paras 28,30. Francis admits much remains to be done to make parishes ‘more completely mission orientated’.

²⁵ EG paras 119-121.

²⁶ EG, paras 122-6.

²⁷ EG, paras 135-159.

²⁸ One may instance here the teaching of the *Joint Public Issues Team* of three English free churches and the Church of Scotland. Such teaching tallies carefully with earlier Catholic teaching from the time of Leo XIII and the British Methodist Conference statements on social questions, particularly those of 1934 and 1949.

²⁹ Key issues and advances that need to be mad in both communions are delicately explored in *The Gift of Authority*, paras 52, 56-63.

other religions and even of no faith commitment per se, such as David Attenborough. Here Francis is spokesman on an even wider level.

One final point can be noted-the tremendous extent to which Francis quotes his brother bishops, usually in terms of teaching given by them corporately in the context of their particular bishops' conferences³⁰. This is a pointer to the fact that Francis sees his role as being as much about *listening* and *learning* on his part as about providing *leadership* and *guidance*. Francis' stress on listening and learning as well as leading and guiding sets an example for all Christian leaders at any level in any church; moreover, it is wisdom also for leaders in secular life.

All this becomes even clearer as we look at his increasing stress on the importance of *synodality* as something that God requires of his Church for the twenty first century global context; moreover, it is about synodality at all levels, including the most local, in the parishes and amongst the laity, who are not simply called to be missionary disciples but who also participate in the *sensus fidei* as the spiritual instinct for whatever is Christianly appropriate in belief, witness and service within their many varying contexts. Moreover, amongst lay people are to be found a huge range of gifts and charisms, all of them gifts of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the entire body. These points were to receive strong and detailed theological underpinning in a major report of the International Theological Commission in 2018³¹.

Francis' ecumenical engagement.

This has won widespread acclaim, though it has not been without rebuffs and sticking points. Thus, Francis found that on a visit to Bulgaria, the Orthodox were unable to join him in prayer, that he had to meet Patriarch Kiril of Moscow on neutral ground in Cuba in 2016 and that he received a rebuff from the Italian Evangelical Alliance, which persisted in claiming that there was an unbridgeable gap between catholic and evangelical faith³².

Francis' treatment of ecumenical visitors to Rome has been even handed, whether dealing with Orthodox of both varieties, Anglicans and classical Protestants, Pentecostals and 'new' churches. Though he duly respects the inherited teaching of the magisterium which differentiates between the Orthodox *churches* and the other Christian *communities*, in practice, he loves all vibrant Christian communities, whether they quite qualify as 'churches' under the principles previously laid down³³. No doubt this is because of his immense confidence in the unlimited reach of the Holy Spirit, distributing His gifts. He has great faith in 'the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, from which we can learn so much from

³⁰ Very apparent when one glances quickly through the references to *Evangelii Gaudium*.

³¹ As discussed below in the section on synodality.

³² Cited in Brauer, M. "Pope Francis and Ecumenism", *Ecumenical Review*, March 2017, p.6.

³³ As Prof Faggioli puts it in his article, 'Ecumenism in *Evangelii Gaudium* and in the context of Francis' Pontificate' in *Perspective Teologia* (Jan-April 2016), pp. 17, 25.

each other'. He believes that 'through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness'³⁴.

We may note that in this he follows the instinct of a predecessor, John Paul II, who stated in *Ut Unum Sint* that, 'despite the objective sin of schism, there had resulted from the earlier splits in the unity of the Church a rich embellishment of the *koinonia*'³⁵.

Francis has great faith in the way in which through 'journeying alongside each other', we can learn with and from our fellow Christians. He stresses the Emmaus like quality of such journeying as, bit by bit, 'we come to realise with whom we have been travelling. Mutual trust is fundamental'³⁶. As 'we put aside all suspicion and mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are seeking, the radiant peace of God's face'. He stresses that 'both the Lord and the world call us to unity.... the Lord asks us for unity; our world torn about by too many divisions that affect the most vulnerable, begs for unity'³⁷. Francis' three great concerns, for peace, justice (especially for the poor) and unity of church and humankind all come together in a symphony that knows no human limits. He rejoices in unity shown in situations previously so characterised by hostility and opposition. This, in 2018, addressing charismatics, he stressed that the Spirit had 'enabled Catholics and Pentecostals to show their gifts and charisms, bestowed by the same Spirit in a symphony of praise to the Lord Jesus, renewing their commitment to fulfil the missionary mandate to the extreme ends of the world'³⁸. To him, it is fundamental that we learn humbly from each other³⁹ and that we never belittle others' gifts lest we lose grace ourselves⁴⁰.

Francis is also impressed by the witness of the martyrs who come from all churches and Christian communities. He stresses the fact that they are persecuted simply because they are Christians. The enemy does not ask whether they are Orthodox, Protestants or whatever⁴¹. Francis sees joint prayer as vital; in response to a question, 'can a Catholic pray with a n Orthodox, a Lutheran, a Pentecostal?', the reply is not simply a 'may', but a 'must'. Such prayer should happen as frequently as possible amongst all the baptised⁴².

Francis' faith in the value of true dialogue extends out even to the enquirers after truth and people of other religions. In a meeting with young people in 2018, he said.

³⁴ EG, para 246.

³⁵ *Ut Unum Sint*, para 85.

³⁶ Francis places great stress on the Emmaus experience, even arguing that 'the entire destiny of the Church is contained in it. The Church listens to everyone's stories, to offer the Word of Life, a life that is faithful to the end'. *Francis at General Audience*, 24.5.2017.

³⁷ Francis on a visit to Rumania, 21.6.2109.

³⁸ At the 50th anniversary of Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Cited at his audience with the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity 28.9.2018.

³⁹ Francis at end of Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.2017.

⁴⁰ *Bulletin of PCPCU*, 29-11-2015.

⁴¹ Francis added, in 2016, that 'if the enemy unites us in death, how can we separate ourselves in life'. *PCPCU Bulletin* (2016), p. 42.'

⁴² Francis, as cited in Bulletin of the PCPCU, 29-5-2015.He also gave a very warm welcome to Abp Welby's prayer initiative, 'Thy Kingdom come'. *Anglican Communion News Service*, 29.5. 2019.

‘We do not make this journey as peacemakers with believers alone, but with everyone. Everyone has something to say to us and we have something to say to everyone.. You young people should know this. When a Christian community is truly listening, it does not proselytise...Fear drives us to proselytise, but fraternity is something else, an open heart and a fraternal embrace’⁴³.

Professor Faggioli argues that Francis’ ecumenism marks an important step forward from that of his predecessors in the papal chair. ‘Overall, Francis ecclesiology is non-ecclesiocentric, and in this sense is step forward from the mixed ecclesiologies of Vatican II where institutional ecclesiology had the last word over ecumenical ecclesiology’⁴⁴.

Francis never seems to lose momentum in developing relationships further. He never fails to find something positive to say in respect of some aspect or other of the community whose representatives he is welcoming in Rome or visiting abroad. In 2018, for the first time, he met a delegation from the African Independent churches⁴⁵. Perhaps his two greatest impacts has been on Lutheran-Catholic and Catholic-Pentecostal relationships.

In the first he built on the work of both the Joint Declaration of 1999 (in the pontificate of JP2) and the olive branches extended by Benedict, both in his praise of Luther for his struggle with sin and in his affirmation of the value of the Lutheran Lord’s Supper⁴⁶. An unattributed article in the Italian periodical *Sedos* argues that Francis made a key difference to the wider reception of the earlier dialogue which had, itself, done so much to put Luther and the years 1517-1555 in a new and more positive light. At the Lund meeting of 2016, commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, he said this.

‘The Reformation has helped to place the Holy Scriptures at the centre of the Church. The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that , apart from God, we can do nothing...With the concept of ‘by grace alone’, he reminds us that God always takes the initiative, prior to any human response, even as he seeks to awaken that response. The Doctrine of Justification thus expresses the essence of human existence before God’.

At the same meeting, he and Bishop Younan, then president of the LWF, agreed to commit themselves to end the pain of division at the Lord’s Table and to work for justice, peace and reconciliation in the world⁴⁷.

His steps in Catholic-Pentecostal relationships may prove finally even more fruitful. In 2014, he attended a Pentecostal rally at Caserta, Italy, where he was greeted by his friend, the

⁴³ *PCPCU Bulletin*, (2018), pp. 50-1.

⁴⁴ Cited in an abstract to Faggioli’s article ‘Ecumenism in *Evangelii Gaudium* and in the context of Francis’ pontificate’ *Perspective Teologia* (Jan-April 2016), pp 17-35. See especially p. 25. Note also p.21, where Francis is cited as stating that the Church *cannot fulfil her catholicity* without those at present separated from her.

⁴⁵ *PCPCU Bulletin* (2018),pp. 6-7.

⁴⁶ mentioned above. See ref 14.

⁴⁷ Report in journal *Sedos*, p. 13 (no author attribution, accessed 27.7.2019, p.13.

lead Pastor Giovanni Traettino, with the words, ‘Pope Francis, many of us believe that the Holy Spirit was behind your election as Bishop of Rome’⁴⁸. Francis, in turn, spoke of his joy at being with his brother, who had first come to meet him in Argentina. The Pentecostal communities across the world now number about 600 million faithful, thus dwarfing all other Christian communities with the sole exception of the Roman Catholic Church. Potentially, this could be the most important bilateral ecumenical relationship of all, though it still has a long way to go and mutual distrust has not entirely been dissipated or overcome. There has, of course, been a dialogue since 1972, though one far from noticed, let alone received by all Pentecostals⁴⁹. It is an irony, but one no doubt inspired by the Holy Spirit, that the most organised church in Christendom and the most varied and diffuse of all major Christian traditions should be finding each other through the work of such inspired leaders as Francis and Traettino, mutually inspired in seeing the same Holy Spirit at work in each other and in their common devotion to mission⁵⁰.

Francis and Synodality.

Pope Francis regards synodality, the process of mutual consultation, learning and listening throughout the whole of the Church, layfolk as well as clergy, as ‘precisely the path that God expects of the Church in the third millennium’⁵¹. Synodality has been implied in all his actions and statements as pontiff. Early on, he requested the International Theological Commission to produce a document giving appropriate historical and theological underpinning to the concept as a legitimate and faithful development within the Tradition. The Commission duly obliged, noting that though the expression synodality had not been specifically mentioned in Vatican II, it was consonant with what Vatican II had said about Church as communion and the active discipleship and responsibility of the laity.⁵²

A synod means literally a gathering together for journeying together, a gathering and journeying that must involve the whole people of God, of whom the vast majority are lay, all called, as Francis repeatedly states, to be missionary disciples, a function in accordance with their status as the baptised. The Theological Commission state.

‘Synodality is established to energise the life and evangelising mission of the Church, in union with and under the guidance of the Lord Jesus. Its renewal is expressed first and

⁴⁸ *Bulletin of PCPCU*, 2014/2. Pp 3-6.

⁴⁹ See the chapters by Cecil Robeck and Ralph del Colle in Rodano, John A (ed). *A Century of Ecumenism* (2012), pp 163-217.

⁵⁰ I have given a fuller account of Francis’ contribution to ecumenism in my article ‘The Ecumenism of Pope Francis’, *Ecumenical Trends*, Jan-Feb 2020, pp. 4-11.

⁵¹ cited in the 2018 document of the *International Theological Commission on Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, para 1. On 29 November 2019, he added that this was ‘an issue close to my heart, a style, a walking together, and this is what the Lord expects of his Church’.

⁵² *Synodality*, para 6. Its consonance can be referenced in the thinking of Vatican II, for example, in *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 44, which asserts, ‘it is the entire people of God, especially the pastors and theologians to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age and judge them in the light of the divine word’, a real pointer to true synodality.

foremost in response to God's gracious call to live as his people, who journey through history to the fulfilment of the Kingdom'⁵³. Elements in this holistic and eschatologically focussed response include 'practice of the spirituality of communion, listening, dialogue and communal discernment...prophetic diakonia in building a social ethos, based on fraternity, solidarity and inclusion'⁵⁴.

The International Theological Commission give a careful review of historical developments leading to the present stress on synodality. They stress that the original Council of Jerusalem, held to consider the then tricky question of whether Gentiles could be admitted to the Church and, if so, under what conditions, was a genuinely synodical occasion in which the apostles and elders took the lead under the supervision of St James⁵⁵. The whole Church, however ratified the decision and agreed to the sending of emissaries to take the news to Antioch and to Paul and Barnabas.

The development of synodical meetings between bishops of local churches was developed in the fourth century with appropriate canons being framed to fit in with the growing tendency to work in unites of neighbouring dioceses with one senior bishop being chosen as the patriarchal leader, who, however, was always to act in consultation with his brethren. Universal councils followed, with Pope Leo the Great of Rome taking a particularly decisive role at Chalcedon in 451⁵⁶.

The strong measures taken by bishops of Rome from Gregory VII (1073-85) onwards tended to weaken synodality and the independence of local churches, necessary as those measures were to controlling abuses in the church by powerful lay magnates and kings⁵⁷. Papal power was to further increase in reaction to the divisions of the Reformation and the threat, as perceived by nineteenth century popes, of liberal and secular thinking. Vatican II, however, saw the beginning of a readjustment of understanding of the relationship between the Pope and the college of bishops, with both sharing responsibility for the whole Church. The understanding of the importance of the local church (defined as diocese) and its particular traditions became greatly enhanced being greatly influenced by improved relations with the Orthodox and interest in their practice of synodality.

The pontificate of Francis sees the development by Francis and others of an understanding that gives due weight to the laity, who have their own particular gifts and charisms which

⁵³ *Ibid*, para 103

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, paras 118-9.

⁵⁵ *Acts 15*. The Theological Commission in their comment (para 21) state 'the decision is taken by James but the question is presented to the *whole* Church...by all listening to the Spirit..initially divergent opinions move towards consensus.'

⁵⁶ Acclaimed by the fathers present, 'Peter has spoken through Leo'.

⁵⁷ *Synodality*, para 32 adds the nuance 'if not properly understood'.

are given by the Holy Spirit for the common enrichment of the whole people of God⁵⁸. The faithful enjoy the *sensus fidei*, the instinct for the faith and what is Christianly appropriate in daily discipleship. To that extent, they share in the infallibility and indefectibility of the Church since the *sensus fidei* (as, of course, previously recognised, well before Vatican II, by Newman) is a source of teaching alongside that of the Magisterium of both the popes and the episcopal college⁵⁹.

Francis stresses the need for continuing listening, receiving and learning at all levels. Both he and the Theological Commission stress the *conspiratio* of all the sources of authority in the Church, Pope, college of bishops and *sensus fidei* of the people. They cite the teaching of Cyprian that a bishop should always consult his presbyters and deacons before making key decisions. They also refer to the ancient principle of Roman law that what affects all should receive the consent of all concerned⁶⁰. The Commission begin the fourth chapter of their report, on synodal renewal, stressing that it 'joyfully welcomes and promotes the grace in which all the baptised are qualified and called to be missionary disciples'. The great challenge is to intensify collaboration in evangelical witness based on everybody's gifts and roles'. It is important to avoid 'excessive clericalism which keeps them (i.e. the laity) away from decision making'. The laity are vital because they are the vast majority of the entire people of God⁶¹.

Additionally, the Commission recognise the ecumenical implications for united mission and service. There should be 'openness to other churches and ecclesial communities in irreversible commitment to journeying together towards complete unity in the reconciled diversity of their respective traditions'. They go even beyond this in recommending 'social diakonia and constructive dialogue with men and women of different religious convictions in order to bring about a culture of dialogue'⁶².

The Commission note that there is increasing agreement within the entire oikoumene that the church is synodal throughout at every level, in a manner reflecting the very communion within the Trinity, on which it is based.⁶³ It notes that 'ecumenical commitment marks out a journey involving the whole people of God. It demands openness to each other in order to demolish the walls of indifference that have separated Christians for generations'.

Para 116 establishes five key guidelines relating to the furtherance of true synodality. The first is its implementation within the local church at every level, reflecting the circularity of

⁵⁸ Ibid, para 18, which talks of the sheer variety of gifts bestowed on the faithful as a sign of the exousia (authority) of the Lord in his Church. para 55 speaks of the faithful as synodoi (fellow pilgrims), all meant to receive the charisms given for the common good'

⁵⁹ *Synodality*, para 56.

⁶⁰ *Synodality*, paras 25,

⁶¹ Ibid, para 73.

⁶² Ibid, para 116.

⁶³ Para 53 of the document of the WCC Faith and Order Division, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is cited.

the relationship between the ministry of the pastors and the participation and responsibility of the laity. The second is ensuring the integration of the exercise of the collegiality of the pastors with the synodality of the whole of the people of God as a lived demonstration of the communion in each local church. The third is the exercise of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome within the communion of the local churches, in synergy with the collegial ministry of bishops and the synodal journey of the whole Church. The fourth is the openness towards other churches and ecclesial communities in irrevocable commitment to 'complete unity in the reconciled diversity of their respective traditions.' The last is the even wider commitment, noted above, to the promotion of a wider dialogue of human encounter.

Para 118 makes an important link between the secular 'growing awareness of the interdependence of peoples', inducing a sense of the world as 'our common home' and the Church's need 'to demonstrate her catholicity in the way in which she works and lives, acting as a catalyst of unity in diversity and of communion in freedom'. It argues that this is a significant contribution that the people of God can make to the promotion of a culture of solidarity, respect and dialogue, of inclusion and integration, of gratitude and gift'. Para 119 reinforces this with the reminder that 'it is an important obligation of the people of God to hear the cry of the poor and the earth and to draw attention to the privileged place of the poor'.

This magnificent vision represents a particularly outstanding contribution by the International Theological Commission to the entire oikoumene, a message of hope and promise that both fulfils the expectations roused by both the Decree on Unity and the Decree *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II.

Two important caveats remain to be made. The first is lest there be any be any misunderstanding on the part of Protestants that Catholic views on church government have now come much closer to theirs. The Commission are quite clear that though the laity are to be consulted on decisions at all levels in the Church, theirs is not make decisions that then bind the individual diocesan bishop, the episcopal college or the Pope⁶⁴. The role of the bishop in decision taking is fundamental at the level of the diocese as local church, the role of the national conferences of bishops at the relevant levels, and that of the entire college of bishops at the universal level, in this last always in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The Commission do recommend that canon law should be adjusted to require priests to have a parish council-at the moment whether such a council exists is at the discretion of parish priests⁶⁵. The second point to make is that any process of acting on creating an institutional structure for consulting the laity is likely to take a long time. Francis has

⁶⁴ This is stressed in *Synodality*, para 69 which makes a clear distinction between *decision making*, which is a job for the entire people and their ministers discerning together, and *decision taking*, which is in the competence of the bishop or bishops involved. Para 67 also stresses that the authority of the pastors is 'not a delegated and representative function of the people but a special gift for up-building the entire people'

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, para 84.

indicated that the next step is likely to involve a synod of bishops to discuss synodality further.

A misunderstanding on the part of the Commission is recorded in para 36. The Commission allege that the Reformation churches see the choice of ministers in Protestant churches, and their resultant authority, as ministers, as stemming from their choice by the people. This is true of the radical Reformation churches, such as the Baptists and Congregationalists, but not true of the magisterial Reformation or, indeed, of Methodism, which, until the 1870's, in its two foundational branches, vested ultimate authority in the ministers or travelling preachers in conference, who 'watch over the Connexion and each other in faith and love', in a way similar to that in which Catholic bishops watch over their individual dioceses, but also have a common responsibility along with the Pope for the welfare on the whole Church. It is true that Luther did believe that, in emergency circumstances, the people should elect new ministers, but Lutherans, and Methodists later, believed in the authority and divine institution of the pastoral office⁶⁶.

Both Protestants and Anglicans have constitutional structures at more local and national/provincial levels which involve elected lay representatives. The Commission praise the Anglican balance with provincial churches being 'episcopally led and synodically governed'⁶⁷. It is to be noted also that, in the Church of England, changes in liturgy and doctrine must be approved by the House of Bishops and cannot occur purely by majority support in the houses of laity and clergy.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that a move to far greater consultation with the laity will meet with Anglican, Protestant and, in many cases, Orthodox approval. The position of the petrine ministry will remain complex, particularly with regard to the doctrine of papal infallibility and the whole question of the infallibility and indefectibility of the Church⁶⁸. The relationship between the two will require further serious theological attention. The dicta of Pope Francis himself and the work of the International Commission on synodality establish a springboard for further rapprochement between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches.

It is greatly to be hoped that wider consultation with the entire community of the baptised will greatly contribute to the mission of the Roman Catholic Church, enabling it to avoid any

⁶⁶ Albeit that they believed and still believe that this pastoral office can be exercised in differing structures—thus Methodists in the USA generally have a separate episcopal order, British Methodism has presbyters but no separate episcopate. Some Lutheran churches have an episcopate in historic succession, others don't. Increasingly, from the 1870's, layfolk have had a co-ordinate role with ministers in Methodist conferences, it being believed that they have valuable, even necessary, insights to offer as the whole people of God.

⁶⁷ *Synodality*, para 36.

⁶⁸ *Infallibility* remains a problem for most Protestants, as evidenced in Anglican article 19 which asserts that 'so also has the Church of Rome erred' (1571). The final *indefectibility* of the Church is a different matter, cf. C. Wesley in the hymn 'Great is our redeeming Lord', which has appeared in every standard British Methodist hymnbook since 1780, containing the lines, 'fortified by power divine, the Church can never fail'.

want of trust between pastors and people which the Wesleyan Methodist pre-ecumenical pioneer described as the 'greatest evil that can befall any church'⁶⁹.

So-what next?

There can be little doubt that the style of Pope Francis' pontificate would greatly facilitate any re-launching of the late Pope John Paul II's appeal for a patient and fraternal dialogue on the potential value of the petrine ministry for the whole Christian Church. The present pontiff is insistent that his is a ministry not *above* the Church, but *within* it, in solidarity with his brother bishops and the entire people of God, the latter potentially including all baptised Christians of other traditions from whom much is to be fruitfully learned and whose patrimony is part of that *rich embellishment* of the common Tradition, to which John Paul II alluded in *Ut Unum Sint*⁷⁰.

I would suggest that there are five key ways in which a petrine ministry 'open to a new situation' of closer rapprochement between the various communions, might serve the needs of all the potential partners concerned.

The first, and probably the most urgently needed in the current world situation is for a universally recognised spokesman for all the Christian world in two contexts, in inter-faith relationships and in witness to Christian principles of peace and social justice to the secular powers. This would help leaders of other religious communities, who would be able to interact with an established interlocutor, able to highlight the key Christian basics, most particularly relating to the person and work of Christ. It would also make secular rulers aware of the common vocation of all Christians, as part of their common discipleship of Christ, to work for the common good in just social relationships across the world.

Next, the petrine minister would encourage mutual respect and learning between churches of all traditions at all levels. He would fulfil the hope of Nicholas Lash that the whole Church should always be *simultaneously a teaching and a learning Church*. It is worth noting in this context that a gradual development towards such a state began under Leo XIII with his decree 'Orientalium Dignitas' (1895), designed to encourage more respect for the eastern churches amongst Latin rite Christians. The petrine minister would stand as the key encourager and facilitator of receptive ecumenism throughout the churches. Some years ago, it was suggested that Anglican bishops might sometimes accompany their neighbouring Catholic bishops on their *ad limina* visits to Rome. Such inclusive visits, on a wider scale and also including leaders from other communions would be instructive for all, popes and their visitor and would give the petrine minister even wider insights than he already receives from his Catholic brethren. In particular, each pope would be able, in communion to live out advice originally given by John Paul II at the millennium.

⁶⁹ Shrewsbury, W.J. 'An essay on the Scriptural Character of the Wesleyan Methodist Economy' (1840), p 54. Shrewsbury was writing at the time of internal schisms from the main connexion.

⁷⁰ para 85.

‘Preparing ourselves for the sacrifice of unity means changing our viewpoint, broadening our horizons, knowing how to recognise the action of the Holy Spirit, who is at work in our brethren, discovering new dimensions of holiness and opening ourselves to fresh aspects of Christian commitment’⁷¹.

Thirdly, a universal primate could act as a final arbitrator in disputes between churches of particular communions. No leading minister in the other major current communions has such authority. Patriarchs of Constantinople and archbishops of Canterbury are *primus inter pares*, have considerable moral authority and try their best to be conciliators but cannot easily effect reconciliations, as has been painfully shown in the Anglican Communion in respect of differences over the ordination of women and issues of sexuality. The holding of the Lambeth Conference in 2008 saw refusals to attend on the part of considerable numbers of African and other bishops, protesting against the ‘unbiblical’ attitudes of many Anglicans in North America and Britain, particularly over sexual relationships.

Bishops of Rome have been acting in settlement of disputes since the Council of Sardica in 343, a council which, however, has been differently interpreted in East and West⁷².

Churches within the Lutheran World Federation experience similar tensions to those experienced by Anglicans. The United Methodist Church, a global church since it includes many overseas conferences as well as the numerically dominant one in the States, is currently undergoing a process that one can only call a schism by agreement as a result of disputes over whether ministers in same sex partnerships should be allowed to exercise ministry⁷³. There are also occasional territorial disputes, as when the Methodist Conference of Southern Africa found that a black-led US Methodist Church was proposing a mission within their area about which it had not consulted their Conference.

In such situations, the mediating advice of a universal primate might prove of great help.

A fourth service that a universal primate might render is that of reminding individual churches, and even, in extremis, particular theologians, of the need for balance in the presentation of Christian teaching and practice. The Church, as a community of fallible human beings, is liable at times, to forget, or at least under-emphasise, certain aspects of the wholeness of Christian truth and practice. Sometimes, as noted by ARCIC, it is necessary to rediscover and re-receive forgotten aspects of the Tradition⁷⁴. Benedict XVI stressed this when he commended Luther for his deep sense of the seriousness of sin, a sense that he felt had been largely lost in the contemporary Church.

⁷¹ Cited in *The Wisdom of John Paul II-A Summary*, Catholic Truth Society, (2001), p. 103.

⁷² For a good account, see McPartlan, P. *A Service of Love. Papal Primacy, the Eucharist and Church Unity* (2013), pp. 59-64.

⁷³ As related in the (British) *Methodist Recorder*, 17.1.2020, p.3.

⁷⁴ As in *The Gift of Authority*, para 25.

Finally, the Universal primate should continue the great teaching ministry of the pontiffs since Vatican II. He can do this to the benefit of the world as well as the Church. He can say things that will resonate with those of other faiths and even of no faith as consistent with their own heritages and moral sensitivity. A future petrine minister might suitably issue an encyclical on the Trinity, in order to show our Abrahamic sisters and brothers that the oneness of the one true God is not thereby compromised, but rather made more glorious through the eternal mutual indwelling of the three persons⁷⁵.

These things constitute a vision of a reality that I long to see come into existence. However, I must end on a note of realistic caution. There is much theological work to be done in all the dialogues, particularly on reconciling the teaching of Vatican I on petrine ministry with that of Vatican II and the subsequent bilateral and multilateral dialogues. There is also the need for much fuller grassroots reception in all our churches. Not all my fellow Methodists, for example, will necessarily see things quite as I have put them, nor, by a similar token, with all Lutherans have as advanced an appreciation of the petrine ministry as characterises the Finnish Lutheran-Catholic dialogue of 2016⁷⁶.

It is right that we 'dream dreams and see visions', as promised to Joel and as fulfilled by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. However, the same Spirit demands that we show persistence and fidelity in prayer and hard work if dreams are to come true! Many questions yet remain to be resolved and will require further patient fraternal dialogue.

David Carter.

⁷⁵ I believe Archbishop Rowan Williams has already tried to do this in a meeting with senior Islamic scholars.

⁷⁶ The Finnish Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue report of 2016 deals with *Church, Ministry, Eucharist*. It treats the petrine ministry in paras 348-355 agreeing, in para 349 that 'when a Lutheran-Catholic differentiated consensus on the theological and practical renewal of this ministry is achieved, the Petrine office of the Bishop of Rome can function as a visible sign and instrument of the Church's Unity'.