

Our Ecumenical Hopes: Where Are They Now?

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Today is the start of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Renowned Irish ecumenist, Michael Hurley SJ, traces the ups and downs of the last hundred years and asks where our once great hopes lie today.

Just ten years ago, in 1998, in the course of a paper read at a meeting in Heythrop College, London, I made bold to say:

The forthcoming millennium, as I envisage it, will bring to an end the present cold winter of ecumenical apathy and inertia and in its place usher in a warm spring of ecumenical hope which will give the ship of the Church a new sense of direction, new vision and energy and enable the movement for Christian unity to gather momentum and speed once more. But I would want immediately to quote Newman's description of spring in his famous sermon of that title at the First Synod of the new English Catholic Hierarchy at Oscott on 13 July 1852. Newman thought of spring not as a halcyon period of great calm but as 'an uncertain, anxious time of hope and fear, of joy and suffering, of bright promise and budding hopes, yet withal, of keen blasts, and cold showers, and sudden storms'. (*One in Christ* 1999/3 p 200)

Though subdued by the Newman quotation, the tone here is upbeat and in retrospect not surprisingly. The occasion was a hopeful one: a meeting of the Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) which has given so much hope to so many people; a meeting called specially to honour the fond memory of Fr John Coventry SJ whom the Association reveres as its founder and who also gave hope to many, not least to us in Ireland. In the 70s, in those dark days in the history of these islands, when British-Irish cooperation, even among Jesuits, was not yet the in-thing it has now happily become, John very bravely and very generously travelled across regularly, bringing hope to North as well as South



and to the infant Irish School of Ecumenics. And this 1998 AIF meeting was taking place in the context of the forthcoming new millennium when hopes were high not only in general but in relation to ecumenism in particular. My Heythrop paper was entitled 'The New Millennium: an Ecumenical Second Spring?'

Ten years later the occasion for these ecumenical reflections is the January 2008 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We are scarcely a decade into this 'new', third millennium and the mills of the Church, like those of God, do grind slowly. But are ecumenical hopes still high? What is the mood of the movement for the 21st century, for the foreseeable future, for 2008?

Centenary of January Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

To begin with, it may be hopeful to recall that 2008 marks the centenary of this January Week of Prayer. Originally called an 'octave' it was an initiative of the American Anglican (Episcopal) priest, Lewis Thomas Wattson. In those days post-Reformation concerns still dominated the Churches' horizons: each was concerned to identify itself over against the others as the one true Church in which personal salvation was to be found. But Wattson came to appreciate the place of the Papacy as an essential and he established a religious congregation, the Society of the Atonement, to pray and work for 'at-one-ment', for corporate reunion with the Roman Catholic

Church; the Octave he conceived as a means to that end.

Happily in the course of the 20th century the Churches' self-understanding changed: it became ecumenical. Their missionary work overseas developed and they came to see their very multiplicity as an obstacle, as a scandal leading to confusion, disbelief and indifference; they became convinced that Christian unity is God's will and his gift 'so that the world may believe'. And it is in that spirit that we now celebrate the January Unity Week. None of the Churches any longer prays that the others will 'come over to us', corporately or individually; we pray rather that all of us will come closer together to give more effective witness and to help the world – not only overseas but here at home in Europe – to believe; to help the post-modern world of unbelief within us and around us to lose its grip, to decline. Together – for the first time ever – what could we not do? What could we not do together to promote peace and justice and also, if not above all, to hasten the development here of the post-secular culture with its positive attitude to religious belief and believers which is now emerging elsewhere? (Cf *Post-secular Philosophy*, ed Phillip Bland, Routledge, London and New York 1998)

But this ecumenical approach, one of the glorious achievements of the 20th century and surely one of the fruits of the Churches' prayers, stands or falls on mutual trust, on a shared understanding that none of us by ourselves alone constitute the one true Church, that none of us want the others simply to change their church allegiance, that what we all want is to help the world to believe. Unfortunately the Orthodox still remain to be convinced. The scramble for Russia which followed the fall of communism led to an influx, an 'inroad' of non-Orthodox Churches and to the impression that a crusade of proselytism was under way. In the Catholic Church, as a result, hopes for unity with the Orthodox in any foreseeable future are not high. If some of us are less concerned about this, we would do well to remind ourselves that Christianity is an

Eastern, not a Western religion and that we ignore at our peril the Christian East.

*The Centenary of *Ne Temere**

The memories which the year 1908 evokes include not only the happy memory of the first celebration of the January Week of Prayer for Christian Unity but also the unhappy memory of the promulgation that Easter, by Pope Pius X, of the *Ne Temere* decree. Among other things this made it obligatory that a 'mixed marriage' – a marriage between a Catholic and Protestant – be celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church and that all the children be brought up as Catholics. The decree was anathema to Protestants and, paradoxically perhaps, opposition to it here in Ireland was probably the first example of united action by all the other Churches. For almost all my life this has been a millstone around our ecumenical necks. Its theology was pre-ecumenical and anti-ecumenical. It played a significant part in weakening the Protestant population. But happily the issue of 'mixed marriages' has now ceased to be the major irritant it was for most of the 20th century; such marriages have become a ground of hope. For this we have to thank specially the Interchurch Family Associations. In this new century 'mixed marriages' can play a promising, hopeful role in the development of a post-secular culture .

Centenary of the 1908 Lambeth Conference

A third memory which 1908 evokes is of that year's Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops and its remarkable statement about relations with Rome:

There can be no fulfilment of the divine purpose in any scheme of reunion which does not ultimately include the great Latin Church of the West, with whom our history has been so closely associated in the past, and to which we are still bound by very many ties of common faith and tradition.

This statement is remarkable for many reasons, but for this in particular, that the two previous Lambeth Conferences had been very angry with

Rome: in 1897 because of Leo XIII's negative decision about Anglican Orders and in 1888 because of Vatican I and its Decree on Papal Primacy and Infallibility. In the meantime however, especially since Vatican II, much water has flowed under the bridges of the Thames and the Tiber. What can we now hope for in the foreseeable future?

One answer can be found in the 2007 document *Growing Together in Unity and Mission. Building on 40 Years of Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue*. It is 'An Agreed Statement of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission' (IARCCUM). Here is its background: (all the quotations which follow are from the London: SPCK 2007 edition.)

Growing Together in Unity and Mission

In May 2000, as a new millennium project, Archbishop Carey of Canterbury and Cardinal Cassidy of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity hosted a meeting of bishops from both communions, 'to seek a way forward in the continuing relationship between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church' (*Preface*). The meeting, which took place at Mississauga in Canada, 'was filled with hope'. The time had come, they felt, to inaugurate 'a new stage in our relations'. They stated:

We believe that now is the appropriate time for the authorities of our two Communions to recognise and endorse this new stage through the signing of a Joint Declaration of Agreement. (para 6)

They decided that a new body be established to inaugurate this 'new stage' But sadly by the time this new body, The International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCUUM), came to meet they had to conclude that, because of the now well-known difficulties within Anglicanism and the new differences these created between our two Communions, 'this present context.... is not the appropriate time to enter the new formal stage of relationship envisaged by the bishops at Mississauga.'

'Nevertheless,' they went on to state:

it must be acknowledged that the progress towards agreement in faith achieved through the theological dialogue has been substantial, but that in the past four decades we have only just begun to give tangible expression to the incontrovertible elements of shared faith. Even in a time of uncertainty, the mission given us by Christ obliges and compels us to seek to engage more deeply and widely in a partnership in mission, coupled with common witness and joint prayer. (para 7)

Fruitfulness of Anglican Orders

But what, if anything, is hopeful in the document which this new body, IARCUUM, produced last year, in 2007? It could appear at first like a tired rehearsal of what has already been agreed and suggested. However the document can be understood to contain a significant message about the whole aim of the Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue. And in addition it includes at least two points of detail which are of considerable interest and quite challenging. The first of these is found in paragraph 113 which reads as follows:

While not losing sight of underlying doctrinal problems regarding the mutual recognition of orders (cf. paragraphs 60 to 61 above), every appropriate opportunity can be taken to acknowledge publicly the fruitfulness of each other's ministries, for example by attending each other's ordinations.

But what does fruitfulness mean? Any hopes we might have that it implies validity will be disappointed. A Catholic theologian can recognize (as, for instance, Fr Ted Yarnold SJ did) that a sacrament can be fruitful, efficacious, although invalid. And in the other Churches where the term 'invalidity' is no longer much used, 'fruitfulness' is clearly distinguished from 'mutual recognition of orders' (as in paragraph 113 quoted above). Here in Ireland since 1974 our Anglicans (the Church of Ireland) accept that Methodist and Presbyterian ordained ministries are 'real and efficacious' – are fruitful, but it is only in very recent years that they are in discussion with the Methodists – not however with the Presbyterians

– about moving forward to ‘interchangeability of ministry’, to mutual recognition of ministry. Both Churches hope this might happen from 2009 ‘on an experimental basis and only in experimental situations’.

However, despite its limitations, as accepted by both Anglicans and Catholics, the concept of fruitfulness and its application to Anglican orders in particular is refreshing and hopeful. The Catholic Church holds Anglican orders to be ‘absolutely null and void’. It seems a contradiction to call them ‘fruitful’. But, on the other hand, no one who has any experience of the life and work of Anglican priests would ever question the value, the goodness, the spiritual reality, the efficacy of their preaching ministry or of their pastoral ministry in general within and outside their parishes. For others this paragraph will come as a welcome reminder of the fact that in the 90s, when former Church of England clergy were being ordained as Roman Catholic priests, it was agreed that the liturgy might give explicit recognition to and thanks for ‘the value’, ‘the fruitfulness for salvation’ of their ‘faithful ministry in the Church of England’ (Cf *The Tablet* 30 April 1994, p 542; 20 April 1996 p 513). Indeed an affirmation of fruitfulness seems little more than an application of what Vatican II’s ‘Decree on Ecumenism’ states in paragraph 3:

The separated Churches and communities as such... have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation.

But a reminder of the ‘fruitfulness’ of Anglican orders, even if it doesn’t mean ‘valid’, does give hope. It can surely help to make Catholic-Anglican relationships, both individual and corporate, more religious, more spiritual, involving shared prayer as well as shared work, less reflective of the post-modern culture which still dominates, more reflective of the post-secular culture to which we aspire. Could it not make Catholics more ready to recognize the holiness of the ordained, more happy to ask Anglican priests for their prayers, for their

blessing, more generous in inviting them to officiate at prayer meetings, bible study meetings and in general at non-eucharistic services?

Eucharistic Hospitality

Unfortunately these non-eucharistic services can be sadly lacking in Catholic churches. Since Vatican II our services tend to be eucharistic in a rather unbalanced way. And, *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*, the 2007 Anglican/Catholic document we are considering, is far from promoting a more relaxed discipline with regard to eucharistic sharing. Paragraph 101 reads as follows:

We encourage attendance at each other’s Eucharists, respecting the different disciplines of our churches... While this would take the form of non-communicating attendance in each other’s churches, it would nonetheless initiate a renewed awareness of the value of spiritual communion. We commend the offering of a blessing which has become a regular practice in some places for those who may not receive holy communion.

This acceptance of the present Catholic discipline is a sobering but very challenging reminder that in the West we may have exaggerated the role of the eucharist in promoting Christian unity, if not indeed its whole place in church life. Perhaps we have confused centrality and frequency? For many Protestants the eucharist is not really central, and for those Christians who do hold it as central – the Orthodox for instance and most Anglicans – centrality doesn’t mean frequency.

When, as for instance at Catholic funerals and weddings, attendance at a service is likely to be ‘cross-community’, can the now traditional inclusion of a eucharist not be more embarrassing than helpful? It can be embarrassing not only for the Anglicans and Protestants who are present and are not made welcome to communion but also for the Catholics present who are no longer churchgoing and for whom communion may not be appropriate.

Organic Unity?

‘The restoration of full organic unity’ has been the clear aim of the Anglican/ Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) from its very beginning in 1967. The principal means to that end has been the production of Agreed Statements on doctrinal matters and the sharing of these insights with the Church membership in general. In retrospect, however, the question can be asked whether there has not been too much emphasis on this ‘dialogue of truth’, and too little on the ‘dialogue of love’— on ‘doing everything together as far as conscience permits’ – which reconciliation also requires. *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*, the 2007 document of IARCUUM, suggests as much when it states that ‘in the past four decades we have only just begun to give tangible expression to the incontrovertible elements of shared faith’. Its message, clear if implicit, is that organic unity, although still our aim, is not for now, not for the foreseeable future, that it is aspirational, for some remote future. It is saying clearly if implicitly what the Anglican-Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission had already stated explicitly in its Malta Report of 1968: ‘the fulfilment of our aim is far from imminent’. Without simultaneous progress on the practical as well as the theological level, ‘the only growing-together will be among delegates to theological conferences’.

So, according to *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*, our aim now is not so much to anticipate the end, the future, but to celebrate the given and so to hasten the end; to become ‘partners’, to cooperate in the whole gamut of Christian life and work, and with a renewed interest in baptism: its joint preparation and celebration (para 100). Eventually, of course, our ecological responsibilities may lead us to shared buildings as well as shared faith. Otherwise the world of unbelief in our parishes and dioceses and in our own very

selves will only grow stronger, and the emergence of a post-secular culture will be further delayed. In 1981 *The Final Report* of ARCIC had:

‘high expectations that significant initiatives will be boldly undertaken to deepen our reconciliation and lead us forward in the quest for the full communion to which we have been committed, in obedience to God, from the beginning of our dialogue.’

My own hope now would be that one of these ‘significant initiatives’ might be the holding of services of mutual forgiveness at various levels. This would require ‘boldness’ as the *Day of Pardon* celebrated at the Vatican in March 2000 certainly did. But it would also help to liberate us from those negative religious feelings which our postmodern culture doesn’t encourage us to admit, much less to show, and which are ecumenically so inhibiting. We might follow the example of our Anglican and Catholic Bishops here in the diocese of Ferns, in County Wexford. In a joint letter in May 2000 they recalled how ‘relationships between us as churches have undergone a sea-change’ and added:

Grateful as we are for that flowering of ecumenical fellowship, goodwill and co-operation, we cannot but feel called to ask God’s and each other’s forgiveness for the many divisive, wounding and unChristian attitudes, policies and practices that found their way into both our churches during the centuries since the Reformation. We each express true repentance on behalf of our own church for these hurtful and damaging words and deeds, and we pray that the reconciliation all of us in both churches seek may be brought nearer by our request for forgiveness and our expression of true conversion of heart in relation to these ecumenical faults and failings.

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