

A Vision for Ecumenism

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Right at the heart of God there is a mystery: three Persons in such profound communion that they are perfectly one, an absolute unity that is a threefold dynamism. Utterly beautiful, a vibrant dance of joy, a harmony that is the deepest peace. This mystery has been shared with us, mere creatures, who in our humanity image the wonder that God is. It is the gift of the God-made-human, Jesus of Nazareth, to us: the realm of heaven present in the confusion of a fallen earth. This is the heart of the community Jesus died that we might have life within it. And it is, as I shall hope to show, the heart of ecumenism.

Relationships locus of encounter with God

On the eve of his death Jesus prayed that his followers should be one (Jn 17:11; 21-23). We need to hear this prayer afresh:

And now I am no longer in the world, but they [my disciples] are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

This is not a missionary mandate, nor is it a recommendation to Christians to sort out their divisions, nor is it intense mystical contemplation; it may include these dimensions, but it is far, far more than any of them. It makes an outrageous but wonderful request: that the followers of Jesus, as they relate to one another, should have the same oneness that God has with Godself. If we have the smallest inkling of what this means, we ought to be pinching ourselves to make sure we are awake. How can finite, often sinful creatures, actually be one with each other in the very same way that the unlimited, perfect and all-holy, uncreated Father and Son are one? There is only one answer: if the Almighty display that indeed nothing is impossible for the Infinite and draw frail human beings to share in its own being. It is all gift; it is all grace that human beings are invited to receive.

The wonder of the gift, however, should not blind us to its content. It offers the opening of our relationships with each other to the intimacy of the inner relationships of the Triune God. Our relationships become therefore the locus of the encounter with God; indeed, relationships are a prime locus for that encounter since Jesus prays about them at the culmination of his earthly life, just as he is embarking upon his saving death and resurrection. Have we ever really taken this seriously in the history of Christian spirituality? It is not to deny the many ways God comes to us: the presence of God within, or the presence of God in others so that whatever we do to the least is done to Jesus, or the presence of God through God's self-revelation in the Word or through material things in the sacraments so many of us rejoice in, especially the waters of baptism and the bread and the wine of the eucharist. But it is to affirm the dignity and the mind-boggling opportunity of human interactions. When we set foot on them, we walk on sacred ground.

With the awareness of the holiness of human relationships comes a new respect for the Christian community, the Assembly, the *Ekklesia*, the Church. For this community is what happens as we meet God through these loving relationships: it is an event, the entry of God into the world and into history in a way God was not previously present. The integrity of the Christian community is thus vital both for those who have the joy to share in it and for those who have the joy of being served by it. Relationships, and specifically relationships of unity, have incalculable value.

Indeed, if we take Jesus' prayer to its logical conclusion, these relationships are, in effect, the extension on earth of the trinitarian dynamism of the Godhead. In the Trinity, the Source of all being, the Father, eternally generates the expression, the icon, the Idea of himself, the Son. This takes place in and through the Spirit who is eternally poured out upon the Son, and the Son in reflection of the Father eternally pours back the Spirit to the Father: Love generating Love in Love—Lover, Beloved, and Loving. Each of the Three completely contains the whole, so each of the Three is entirely God, and all Three together are the One God.

It is significant for unity as lived by human beings that this dynamism of love is not limited to itself. As the relations among the Persons of the Godhead are all other-directed, so too are the Three-who-are-One in their togetherness other-directed. The unbounded dynamism of love, as it were, overflows. God creates. God creates another that is fully other and is not God. So Love brings into being the cosmos which can be loved, and in the cosmos that same Love, in a special way, loves humankind, made in its image. Then through the salvific work of Jesus, humankind become able to receive this Love and be transformed by it. And because it is the same Love that they receive, humans love the One from whom the gift came but also, just as the One who loves them does, they love universally. So, in their love for one another they transform their relationships, building the unity of the Christian community and, true to its self-giving nature, love does not stop there. Like the divine love at its source, it goes out to embrace the whole creation and, in a special way, every human person. Hence, the mutual love of the community contains both the mystical dimension of an encounter with God and the missional dimension of love that reaches out beyond itself, taking to itself, as Jesus did, the agony of the world.

The actualization of the mystical body

Such unity is clearly more than just ecumenism. But, even so, it gives enormous dignity to ecumenical work and lies at its very heart. For if the community is divided it is impaired in living relationships as the locus of encounter with God. In other words, a broken Church (except through the miracle of the crucified Christ) cannot love as God loves and its relationship with God is impaired. This is a fundamental truth much ignored by Christians because, perhaps, it is so frightening. At the very least it has been a blind spot over the centuries. All the time we spent in the past to attack our fellow Christians was not merely a mistake, it was an assault upon our own spiritual health. But the repair that ecumenism makes has even greater implications. It is central to mission but, it must be added, central in a way that emphasizes the presence of God at work in and through the community. Unity renders God present, and so it is God who reaches out to others. God, as it were, gives witness to God. How we have cheated the world by our divisions!

The repair brought by ecumenism is essential. This can be highlighted by looking from another angle at the reality of God in the relationships of the followers of Jesus when they are united. Since the presence of God is realized through bodily human beings, what takes place is not only spiritual. It is engaged in by humans in all their humanity, with their flesh and blood, their emotions, imaginations, memories, impulses, longings, needs and capacity for pain. Just as Jesus was. And through Jesus' work this community of corporeal human beings is brought to share in the divine life. Indeed, he is present in the midst of it, as he promised in Matthew 18:20, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' A united community sharing in God's life is, effectively, the actualization of the

mystical body of Christ and the locus of the presence of Jesus in the world. It fulfils the promise of Scripture found in the image of Christ's body in the Pauline literature of the New Testament.

There are two iterations of the image of the body of Christ; on the one hand there is the one in Romans and 1 Corinthians where the Semitic understanding of the body as the whole person is used to say that the Christian community is identified with the whole person of Christ and, on the other hand, there is the later understanding of Ephesians and Colossians where Christ is portrayed as the head of his body, the source of its fullness, its inspiration to peace and love, into whom all the members of the body must grow.¹ In the context of describing the harmonious interactions within the Christian community, both versions of the image of the body, and especially the earlier one, identify the community with Christ. This makes Christians *together* become the presence and the action of Jesus in the world: *alter Christus*. Repairing the Christian community, therefore, releases it to be the means of Christ's impact on the world.

At the same time Jesus is also distinct from the community, which is emphasized by the later understanding of the image in Ephesians and Colossians. He is the one into whom Christians are baptized, who pre-exists all created being. Hence in addition to Jesus working in and through the persons who form the community, he is present among them, more than them while united with them. The work of the community in this sense is to be the vehicle of One beyond it, a means by which the person of Jesus, the Risen One who once walked the dusty streets of the Holy Land, can act in the world. It is Jesus who continues his mission. Again the repair of the community facilitates this.

The soul of the world

The Christian community is thus the realization in history of an eschatological fact: God among us, the new Jerusalem. It is vital, therefore, that its relationships are intact. Whatever else may be challenging (disagreements about doctrine, ministry, liturgy and styles of worship, patterns of life and questions of ethics, church order and decision making, practical or spiritual gifts) relationships that allow the presence of God to be effective and felt must be maintained. This is central to the Church's calling, key to its very being, and the primary task of ecumenism. All the other aspects of communal repair (in doctrine, ministry, liturgy, ethics, church order, and so on) fall into second place, even though they are necessary because they maintain and express relational communion lived in God, grounding it more fully in human life. The ecumenical task, therefore, whether in its primary concern for relationships or in its secondary concern for the means of maintaining and expressing them, is to give health to the Christian community so that it might be, as the second century Letter to Diognetus suggested, the soul of the world, since Christians are a permanent ferment within society for its good: 'what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world.' Despite the tension that might exist between society and what animates it, between body and soul, the animating principle serves social harmony and cohesion. As the Letter says: 'The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet keeps together that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they keep together the world.'²

The missional possibilities set free by ecumenism are vast and challenging. They are challenging because, in the first instance, they are a call to holiness. It is only persons who are willing to let their lives be transformed and disrupted by divine love, despite their inevitable moments of failure and falling away, who can enter into the quality of relationships that allows them to welcome

¹ The underlying themes of both iterations are 1) that the body though one is also multiple, 2) that the multiple nature of the members is so that they may serve one another, 3) that this multiplicity is the outworking of the gifts of the Spirit, and 4) that this gives believers different, but necessary, roles within the community.

² *The Letter to Diognetus*, Chapter 6 <<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>>.

the gift of unity that God gives. But once this challenge, which is to receive the unmerited grace of Jesus on the cross, has been accepted with its implications for the transformation of our sinfulness as we enter into new life, it then opens out onto the vastness of the missional enterprise. Central to that is the calling to Christians to be united so that a healthy body of Christ may bring people together, a united body to bring about a united world. On a planet always more torn apart by war, environmental catastrophe, and global criminality, this relational prospect is ever more urgent. Christian unity has the potential to bring a massive impact for good as the New Jerusalem is present across the earth through the community's relationships, the eschatological future realized in the here and now.

This context of serving cohesion within nations and among them is one where the Five Marks of Mission,³ as a useful structure to understand the evangelistic vocation, can be fully developed. Indeed, looking at the Five Marks through the lens of Christian reconciliation shows the missional potential of relationships lived in unity.

Proclamation, the *first mark*, which speaks of personal evangelism, becomes more effective because anyone giving witness speaks not only from the experience of God that takes place within the community but also from an experience that, by encouraging social cohesion, is visibly having a positive impact upon the world. Indeed, and this is a crucial point, as people outside the community learn how to live in accordance with the quality of love that opens them to the life of unity, they are enabled to enter such relationships with members of the living body of Christ, so they too, at first hand, can experience the Risen Christ present in their being together in love with others.

The *second mark* of mission where people learn how to be authentic disciples, so that the Church can fulfil its mandate from the Lord to 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Mt 28:19) is made real as people discover the necessary life of holiness that, in the midst of its frailty, is lived by the Christian community. This trains them in discipleship and, through practice, convinces them more deeply of what they have begun to experience.

The *third mark* of mission in which the followers of Jesus tend the wounds of the world becomes the expression of the very same divine love that was at work in Jesus who cared for people's needs, and so is not just an imitation of him, or a witness to how he acts, but the demonstration of his presence in action.

The *fourth mark*, which deals with the underlying political, social, and economic structures of the world that cause so much of its pain, becomes the promotion and development of relationships that set up patterns of mutuality, showing how the life and message of Jesus can bring about the renewal and liberation of the world. A world at one with itself is a world transformed by the gospel.

And the *fifth mark* of care for creation places the love that the community lives in its full divine context, as it lives out and acts upon the love it shares in, the divine love that goes forth to all things. The deeper the community shares in that love, the more intense its love for the created world will be, and the better it will show God's love for everything that love has made—distant

³ Initially developed within the Anglican Communion, the Five Marks of Mission have become current among many other Christian communions, see <<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>>.

galaxies and stars and, on this planet, trees, rivers, animals, even the very air we breathe, down to the smallest atoms.

The role of theology

But all this, despite the power of gospel life among many Christians, risks to be only a dream. And it will stay a dream, except in some prophetic groups, if the prayer Jesus offered on the night before his saving sacrifice remains so imperfectly implemented. An enormous conversion is needed by the churches. The quality of unity, which is the quality of God's relationships with Godself, needs to become the passion of the churches, and with that comes a renewed but also a fresh appreciation for ecumenism. Christians can no longer afford to rob the world of the gift they have been given.

But how can we do this? Of course, we have, in the first place, to be converted to the deeper quality of relationship that opens us to the gift of unity Jesus prayed that we might have. This means embracing the cross of change, personal and collective. At the same time, conversion will never happen if the vision of unity does not move hearts. And new vision cannot come about unless we are able to think differently. Which means that there is a central place for theology. Theology, rooted in the life of the whole person, opens our minds to depths in the message of Jesus. Such an approach does not demand the promotion of only one kind of theology, but the exploration of anything that gives rise to a deeper understanding of unity and thus of the ecumenical task itself.

This in no way invalidates all the other forms of ecumenism—missional, practical, juridical, engaging in shared spirituality, common prayer, martyrdom in the ecumenism of blood, gestures of kindness and hospitality, the sharing of resources, all the tiny but profound ways of building relationships that Christians carry out day by day. These are always fruitful. But there is a pressing need for a shared understanding of the huge value of the various Christian communions building up the united communion of the one Church. And this, to be effective, needs to give due place to recovering the shocking proposal of Jesus' prayer in John 17 that, in him, our relationships with each other can be a focal place for our encounter with God. Theology has a key role in inspiring a deeper and, let's face it, more beautiful understanding. Theology is an essential element in generating the culture that can make ecumenism flourish: a culture of unity.

Anything that stimulates deeper thought in this field, therefore, is welcome. And fresh things are already happening, as can be seen in the rise in the last couple of decades of receptive ecumenism as a specific and profitable approach to interchurch theology that both deepens the appreciation of the churches for one another and presents them with the chance for healing, for health-giving transformation within their own integrity, through their reciprocal learning. So too, in its modest way, is the Society for Ecumenical Studies a spur to a culture of unity. By helping Christians think ecumenically, exploring how together they can understand weighty matters that have divided them for centuries, as well as how better they can go about the ecumenical task, the Society has a small but important role within the concert of ecumenical instruments and life. The greater variety of ways of stimulating ecumenical theology that the Society is currently developing (podcasts and articles alongside webinars and conferences) are simply a means to encourage thinking, with the well-founded hope that thought will stimulate vision. Given the shadows currently creeping across the world, every possible contribution, however limited, is needed to bring about a culture of unity. The health of the Church and the world it serves require it. A culture of unity is essential to bring about a life of unity, that unity which is peace with God and peace among all.