

A general view of bilateral dialogues: doors and obstacles

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A general view of bilateral dialogues: doors and obstacles ¹

- **Two Cardinals reflect on dialogue**

In the last three months I have listened to two talks from distinguished Roman Catholic Cardinals both of whom have been deeply involved in bilateral conversations reflecting now on the future of ecumenical dialogue. The first was a talk by Cardinal Avery Dulles given in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the faith and order movement in the USA. Cardinal Dulles expressed strongly his opinion that theological conversations have run their course, they have achieved as much as they are likely to. He made the suggestion that the time has come for new initiatives in the ecumenical movement and referred to something called ‘receptive ecumenism’, though he admitted he knew little about it, only that there had been a conference in Durham on the subject that had generated great enthusiasm. The second talk I listened to was in Sibiu only a few weeks ago by Cardinal Walter Kasper who said quite the reverse. His view was that we need to go on in theological conversation working even harder at outstanding issues of disagreement. Perhaps at the end of this day we shall be able to answer which of the Cardinals we have more sympathy with!

You have given me a vast subject to talk about – ‘A general view of bilateral dialogues: doors and obstacles’ - it’s not easy to see how best to handle it in part because of the complexity of the subject. It’s also not entirely helpful to talk about the bilateral dialogues without taking some account of the multilateral dialogues. The multilateral has provided an overarching context in which to view the results of bilateral conversations and there has been mutual influence between them. It is doubtful, for example that some of the bilaterals would have produced convergence and consensus in the areas of baptism, eucharist or ministry, without BEM or that BEM itself would have reached such a high degree of agreement without some of the influence from bilaterals.

I’m going to make a few introductory remarks, say something about two issues important for all bilateral dialogues; talk thirdly about the goal of the dialogues and the emerging

¹ This talk is based on a review article published in 2006 in the journal *Ecclesiology*

agreements and outstanding stumbling blocks; and then finally come to a door that could be the way into a new future. My hope is that these ramblings will provide avenues for conversation and also set a scene for our discussions context for the more focussed study of certain bilateral dialogues this afternoon. Perhaps at the end we shall be nearer to answering which of our two Cardinals we believe has got the future right.

- **An ever expanding corpus**

I find it useful to remind myself that the modern ecumenical conversations go back to the missionary conference in Edinburgh in 1910 when an American Episcopalian, Bishop Brent, drew attention to the necessity for a theological dialogue to explore issues of faith and order that were causes of church divisions. A multilateral conversation between some Orthodox churches, Anglicans, Lutherans and Protestant churches began in the first World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927. There was no Roman Catholic presence at Lausanne. This conference was largely responsible for defining the agenda that still engages ecumenical conversation. The multilateral theological conversation continued in a series of World Conferences on Faith and Order and in the work of the Faith and Order Commission in which the movement came to be focused within the structures of the World Council of Churches. It was the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement after Vatican II that had a decisive influence on church to church conversations, now the number of bilateral dialogues increased dramatically. Every church, it seems, is now in conversation with every other church in a complex, almost incestuous, network of conversations, with some very unlikely partnerships. The Roman Catholic-Evangelical and the Roman Catholic – Pentecostal conversations, though hardly known, have produced some of the most interesting and serious theological reports. The sheer numbers of reports from the conversations is staggering and almost weekly more seem to arrive on the table and these are only the international ones. They have been collected together in:

- *Confessions in Dialogue*, ed Nils Ehrenstrom and Gunther Gassmann, 1975, pages 265
- *Growth in Agreement I*, ed Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer 1984, pages 504

- *Growth in Agreement II*, ed Geoffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, William Rusch, 2000, pages 939
- And about to be published 2007 *Growth in Agreement III*.
- And there are more texts not yet incorporated into volume III. Some very important texts like the latest report from the Anglican Orthodox dialogue on the Church which has been 12 years in the making, *The Church of the Triune God*; the IARCCUM document that Bishop Tony will refer to this afternoon; the Lutheran-Roman Catholic text, *The Apostolicity of the Church*; the Roman Catholic-Reformed report, *Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom*. Can there be any more to be said?

The volumes get longer and longer and make better and better door steps. It has become impossible to carry them to international meetings! I could only manage one volume. These collections contain some of the best theology written in these last decades.

- **Different sorts of bilateral reports**

Another thing that makes it difficult to talk generally about the bilaterals besides the sheer volume is that there are great differences between the bilateral reports, not surprising, as they do not all have the same aim. The Pentecostal-Roman Catholic conversation, for example, is not concerned with imminent structural union but set out to explore the life and spiritual experience of the churches, hoping to eliminate mutual misunderstandings by stating differences with ‘clarity and charity’ and looking to find agreement wherever agreement is possible.² The Baptist-Lutheran conversations aimed at clarifying differences, finding convergences and agreements in order to increase co-operation between the two churches.³ The Evangelical-Roman Catholic conversation states clearly that it did not envisage organic structural unity but rather sought to increase mutual understanding and discover what is held in common. It was definitely not a step towards union negotiations, but rather, ‘a search for such common ground as might be discovered between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics as they each try to be more

² *Growth in Agreement II*, ed. J. Gros, H Meyer, W. Rusch, 2000, *Eerdmanns and WCC*, pp. 713; 735; 753.

³ p. 155.

faithful in their obedience to mission'.⁴ Many, including the Lutheran-Reformed conversation, talk about aiming to move towards greater fellowship in faith, witness and service.⁵ The reports from these conversations are exploratory and discursive. On the other hand certain of the conversations state their specific aim as that of attaining visible unity, though the expressions they use to describe visible unity often differ significantly. The Anglican and Roman Catholic conversation aims at, 'full organic union', 'visible unity and full ecclesial communion', 'the restoration of full communion...full unity to which Christ calls us'.⁶ The Eastern Orthodox conversation with the Roman Catholic Church talks of re-establishing full communion.⁷ The texts from these conversations are often more concise and of the genre of consensus documents.

- **Mission the motivating force**

The reports differ according to the different goal of the conversation- just getting to know one another, or full organic union. But one thing that unites them is that the motivating force for entering dialogue at all is the mission of the Church. There is hardly a document that does not give as its rationale the absolute requirement to be together for the sake of the mission of the Church. The vision of 1927 has not been lost. Two of the reports in particular, the Evangelical-Roman Catholic report and the Pentecostal – Roman Catholic dialogue explore the nature of mission, the understanding of evangelism/isation and common witness without avoiding the hard subject of the damaging effects of proselytism. The conclusion of the reports is that every possible opportunity should be taken for common witness now. Both the Pentecostal and Evangelical conversations with the Roman Catholic Church show that when Christians get to know one another and come to respect each other, although their aim is not visible unity and although some big differences remain, nevertheless, there is a possibility to witness together on the basis of common faith in the gospel message.

⁴ p. 401.

⁵ p. 235.

⁶ p. 326.

⁷ p. 669.

- **The power of dialogue**

These reports talk over and over again of the spiritual experience of dialogue. Many of them describe movingly what happens when those who have been estranged, those who have formally condemned one another, come out of their isolations, sit around a table, listen to one another, and learn the truth about each other. The Adventist-Lutheran report describes it like this: ‘we came together in 1994 as strangers, we parted in 1998 as friends.’⁸ The Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue describes how friendships were formed, and mutual respect grew as they grappled with difficult and divisive questions. But the time was marked by a will to speak the truth plainly and in love. ‘Neither compromise nor the quest for lowest common denominators had a place; a patient search for truth and a respect for each other’s integrity did.’⁹ It is impossible to read these reports without seeing that dialogue can lead to a re-reading together of the history of division, a reconciliation of the bitterest of memories, and even the lifting of the anathemas and condemnations of the past. What is often discovered is that much more is held in common than divides. Dialogue breeds mutual respect as Lutherans discovered with Baptist and Methodist partners. It leads not only to a greater understanding of the partner but also of the self and can be, as the Disciples-Reformed conversation explains, a recovery of balance in ones own tradition.¹⁰ Many conversations underline with the Anglican-Roman Catholic report, *Church as Communion*, the importance of the experience of conversation around the table being supported by a life of common prayer:

The members of the commission have not only been engaged in theological dialogue. Their work and study have been rooted in shared prayer and common life. This in itself has given them a profound experience of communion in Christ; not indeed that full sacramental communion which is our goal, but nevertheless a true foretaste of that fullness of communion for which we pray and strive.¹¹

It is easy to miss this deeper, spiritual context when reading these reports.

II Two underlying issues

⁸ p. 297.

⁹ p. 401.

¹⁰ p. 179.

¹¹ p. 328.

I want now to reflect on two issues that link the dialogues, the first relates to ecumenical method and the second to the underlying theme of *Koinonia*.

- **Scripture and Tradition and ecumenical method**

There is evidence from the reports that many of the conversations have been influenced by the breakthrough arrived at in the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal, 1963, on the relation between Scripture, Tradition and traditions. This made possible the development of an ecumenical method, which does not set the witness of Scripture and Tradition over against each other but goes back to Scripture and the early tradition and the traditions of the churches and then re-states afresh the faith of the church through the ages in language that is not identical with that of either partner.

The Lutheran- Roman Catholic report puts it this way: ‘the scripture can no longer be exclusively contrasted with Tradition, because the New Testament itself is the product of primitive tradition. Yet as the witness to the fundamental Tradition, scripture has a normative role for the entire later tradition of the church.’¹² On the inter-relation of the two sources the report is clear that they are not two separated sources for the function of holy scripture is to serve the authenticity of the Church’s living experience in safeguarding the holy tradition from all attempts to falsify the true faith, not to undermine the authority of the Church, the Body of Christ. There is a definite move away from what was perceived in the past as a strict form of ‘*sola scriptura*’ and willingness now on the part of many churches to assess Tradition in the light of Scripture. In some dialogues this leads to a rapprochement on some of the most polarised of issues of the past. This is illustrated in the treatment of the ministry of the bishop of Rome in the Methodist-Roman Catholic conversation:

...the primacy of the bishop of Rome is not established from scriptures in isolation from the living tradition. When an institution cannot be established from scripture alone, Methodists, in common with other churches which stem from the Reformation, consider it on its intrinsic merits, as indeed do Roman Catholics; but

¹² p. 456.

Methodists give less doctrinal weight than do Roman Catholics to long widespread tradition.¹³

This leads to the bold statement that ‘a universal primacy might well serve as a focus of and ministry for the unity of the whole church’.¹⁴

While there is evidence in many dialogues that the old polarisation between Scripture and Tradition has given way to an emerging common understanding of the relation of the two, not all conversations can agree this. The Baptist-Roman Catholic dialogue records different views on theological authority and on method. ‘Baptists rely on scriptures alone, as interpreted under guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Reformation principle...Roman Catholics move from the scriptures interpreted in the light of the Tradition under the leadership of the magisterium, in a communal process guided by the Holy Spirit.’¹⁵ But even here there is an acknowledgement that difference is not extreme. Baptists do in fact invoke Baptist heritage in the same way as Roman Catholics invoke Tradition. What needs to happen now is for the dialogue to go on in which theory and practice are actually brought together. Disagreement in this area is more strongly identified in the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue. Both agree that the Church is always subject to Scripture but there is considerable disagreement on the role of Tradition. While Pentecostals say that anyone under the guidance of the Holy Spirit can interpret scripture, Roman Catholics allow that interpretation is by the people discerned by the teaching office of the Church under the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, while a great number of churches can claim an emerging common view on the relation of Scripture and Tradition which allows convergence, and even consensus, to be discovered on hitherto divisive issues of faith, sacraments and ministry, not all churches in these conversations are in agreement. There is a conversation to be had here both in

¹³ p. 593.

¹⁴ p. 593.

¹⁵ p. 382.

bilateral conversations as well as in the multilateral in the continuation of the hermeneutics study of Faith and Order.¹⁶

- **The potential of *koinonia* for leading to a common understanding of the Church and its unity**

One thing that has been a breakthrough across the dialogues is the claiming of the concept of *koinonia*. In the last two decades the theme of *koinonia* has radically influenced the conversations and how different traditions, Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal have contributed insights which elucidate the concept. Many reports recognise *koinonia* as the fundamental reality of the Church as the Methodist-Roman Catholic report insists, it is not another one of many models of the Church.¹⁷ It is the fundamental reality to which many biblical images point: ‘the Bride of Christ’, ‘the household of God’; ‘the vine’; ‘the Temple of the Lord’.¹⁸ The report of the Joint Working Group sums it up: ‘*koinonia* refers to the source and nature of the life of the Church as the Body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. It refers to the divine relation of the persons of the Holy Trinity into which, through faith and baptism, Christians are drawn and thus participate in that divine life and are brought thereby into a relationship with one another in that divine life.’

The emphasis on *koinonia* opens up a number of fruitful avenues. **First**, it enables divided churches to recognise that they are already bound together in the communion of God’s own life and love. So, Anglicans and Roman Catholics affirm that they are already in a ‘real though imperfect communion’, they can recognise ‘the profound measure of communion’ that exists both within and between them.’¹⁹ Methodists and Roman Catholics say that they already enjoy a ‘certain measure of ecclesial communion’.²⁰ And

¹⁶ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels, An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*. Faith and Order Paper 182 (WCC, 1998).

¹⁷ p. 587.

¹⁸ p. 334.

¹⁹ p. 328 and 340.

²⁰ p. 621.

Pentecostals and Roman Catholics recognise ‘a certain, though imperfect communion’,²¹ that already binds them to one another making a degree of common mission a possibility. This recognition of what already exists does go some way, though not all the way, to overcoming fears that the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches understand the Church as coterminous with their own boundaries. But even this looks somewhat different to some in the light of the cumulative effect of some recent Vatican documents, which although they may be intended as internal documents are understandably seen as effecting ecumenical partners. It remains for churches in the future to take up the conversation of who is Church and how separated churches can recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

After reading what is said in the various reports about *koinonia* it is easy to understand why Cardinal Willebrands once remarked that the deepening of an ecclesiology of communion is perhaps the greatest possibility for tomorrow’s ecumenism and may provide the right context for examining outstanding issues. These documents do seem to support that view in spite of voices in the ecumenical community that suggest that too much weight is being placed upon this one concept.

III Elements of visible communion: doors and obstacles

- **ecclesial elements that constitute unity**

While the theme of *koinonia* is the one that is common to almost all of the reports, there are marked differences in what is said about the characteristics or elements that would constitute a fully, visible, ecclesial communion. These differences appear to be more than a matter of emphasis and constitute what may be more a major fault line.

The Anglican-Roman Catholic statement on the Church, *Church as Communion*, 1982 offers a picture of what it calls the constitutive elements of visible communion.²² These include: the common confession of the apostolic faith, revealed in Scripture and set forth

²¹ p. 743.

²² p. 338ff.

in the Catholic Creeds, with the acceptance of the same moral values, the same vision of humanity and hope in the final consummation of all things, a common baptism, celebration of one eucharist, the leadership by the apostolic ministry with oversight entrusted to the episcopate, which holds the local church in communion with all the local churches, a ministry of oversight having collegial and primatial expressions open to the community's participation in discovering God's will, and the ministry of a universal primate as a visible focus of the unity. These are not separable items but an inter-related package belonging to a fully visible ecclesial communion. The Eastern Orthodox- Roman Catholic report, *Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church*, goes further in emphasising the inter-relation between the various constitutive elements. So, communion in faith is increased by sacramental communion, for every sacrament presupposes and expresses the faith of the Church. The ministry maintains and guarantees the growth of communion in faith and sacraments.

Thus, unity of faith within a local church and between local churches is guaranteed and judged by the bishop, who is witness to the tradition, and in communion with his people. It is inseparable from unity of sacramental life. Communion in faith and communion in the sacraments are not two distinct realities. They are two aspects of a single reality, which the Holy Spirit fosters, increases and safeguards among the faithful.²³

So, visible *koinonia* is only possible if churches have faith, sacraments and priesthood in common. To this is added in a subsequent report the threefold ministry with apostolic succession, together with the possibility of taking council together and a ministry of primacy.²⁴

Conversations, particularly where Orthodox or Roman Catholics are a partner, emphasise the interlocking package of elements that belong to a fully visible ecclesial life. This appears to differ from the emphasis in, for example, the Reformed-Lutheran report, *Towards Church Fellowship*, which states, 'Finally, as Lutheran and Reformed churches we affirm that full agreement in the right teaching/preaching of the gospel and the right

²³ p. 666.

²⁴ *The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church*, p672ff.

administration of the sacraments is necessary and sufficient for the true unity of the church.²⁵ However, the report does move on to consider the question of ministry. While there is a distinction between the ‘church-constituting elements’, of word and sacraments, on the one hand and ministry and structure which are not described as ‘church-constituting elements’ on the other, the report holds that there should be no ‘false separation’ between them. Although it is agreed that vigilance is required concerning ministerial structure and church organisation, there is no suggestion that a single ministry, apostolic succession, or collegial and primatial characteristics are constitutive of ‘full communion.’ However, there is an expressed desire for new structures to be discovered to serve the different levels of the churches’ life in order to strengthen common witness. But this is still a long way from a quasi-sacramental view of the ministry and structure that is found in those conversations in which the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches are partners.

There is more work to be done in all of these conversations on how the partners view the shape, or **goal, of fully, visible, ecclesial communion**. The discussions between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church were well aware of the significance of portraying together a shared vision of visible unity. Their reports recognise that visibility is realised especially in the celebration of the eucharist and that what is celebrated there has to be actualised in a life of common prayer and faith and faithfulness to the gospel, of sharing spiritual and even material goods.²⁶ The intention of this conversation is to build on this insight by discussing the fundamental structure of the church as well as the primacy of the bishop of Rome. Many conversations agree with what was said in the introduction to the first volume of *Growth in Agreement*.

...We should attain greater clarity and agreement on our *conception of the kind of unity we are seeking*. It is of utmost importance for ecumenical motivation whether the ecumenical aim is swathed in a nebulous general desire for unity or whether it is clearly defined at least in basic outline.²⁷

²⁵ p. 236.

²⁶ p. 396.

²⁷ *Growth in Agreement I*, p.8.

This is where the important new multilateral report from Faith and Order, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, may help. Much hangs on this report as it did on BEM in the past.

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- **Agreement in faith**

While there does appear to be a major difference in understanding about what would constitute visible unity, there are, nevertheless, many remarkable advances in understanding the several elements of visible unity. In the area of communion in faith there is the very significant agreement between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches on **christology**. Agreement discovered in unofficial theological conversations over a number of years has subsequently been formally declared in a series of bilateral declarations between the Pope and the some heads of individual Oriental Orthodox churches. For example the *Common Christological Declaration* made in 1994 by Pope John Paul II and his Holiness Mar Dinkha IV, Catholicos of the Assyrian Church of the East in which they say:

Whatever our christological divergences have been, we experience ourselves united today in the confession of the same faith in the Son of God who became man so that we might become children of God by his grace. We wish from now on to witness together to this faith ...²⁹

The Orthodox contribution in many of the conversations has helped to form a common understanding of the doctrine of the **Holy Trinity**, bringing the Trinity back into the centre of religious thought and life. There has been a re-opening of the question of the *filioque clause* in the Western version of the Nicene Creed, with a recognition by some that it is no longer a dividing matter. Some churches have as a result dropped the clause, or at least recognised that on certain occasions it is not appropriate to include it in the form of the Creed. The *Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity* from the Reformed-Orthodox conversations uses both scripture and the writings of the early Fathers to set forth a common view of the Holy Trinity. Both agree that what they have been able to say together cuts across mistaken polarised views of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity,

²⁸ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church, a stage on the way to a common statement*, Faith and Order Paper 181, (WCC Publications, 1998).

²⁹ p. 711.

according to which Latin theology moves from the oneness of God to the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while Greek theology moves from the three Persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the oneness of God. What is provided is ‘pre-eminently a statement on the tri-unity of God as Trinity in unity and unity in Trinity.’³⁰

A third major breakthrough towards an affirmation of a common faith comes in the statements on the doctrine of **justification** in number of dialogues. The most remarkable is from the Lutheran –Roman Catholic conversations in a series of reports leading to *Church and Justification*, published in 1993.³¹ These reports were followed in 1999 by a *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.³² The Joint Declaration summarises the results of the theological conversations ‘with the necessary accuracy and brevity’! The result is the statement that Lutherans and Roman Catholics:

...are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.³³

The impressive moves towards agreement on the apostolic faith would profit from being brought together with the explication of the faith in the report of the Faith and Order Commission, *Confessing the one Faith*.

- **baptism and Eucharist**

In spite of the many remarkable convergences that have been achieved in part through the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, there remain differences between some churches on both baptism and eucharist. Baptists and Roman Catholics identify the difference between Baptists who baptise on personal testimony of faith and Roman Catholics (and others) who practice both adult and infant baptism. But even here the

³⁰ p. 287.

³¹ p. 485ff.

³² p. 566.

³³ p. 566-567.

positions are not static and the report recognises the need to reflect further together on whether faith is solely an individual response.³⁴ Disciples and Roman Catholics believe ‘on the whole’ they have great agreement on the understanding of the **eucharist**, but that they still need to discuss in more depth the nature of the presence of Christ in the eucharist and the question of episcopacy as the institution necessary for an authentic celebration.³⁵

- **ministry**

In the area of ministry, not surprisingly differences remain. The question of **episcopacy** is still an issue between those churches which have bishops and those which do not. But the focus of the discussion has somewhat shifted in helpful ways, which may lead in time to greater agreement. There is a general recognition that the ministry of *episcopus* is exercised in different ‘modes’ - personal, collegial and communal. Different churches emphasise one aspect rather than another. The question for every church is how a right balance between the three dimensions can be restored so that the three dimensions of *episcopus*, **personal**, **collegial** and **communal**, serve the unity of the Church. This is a fruitful opening for the future. The other sharp issue for discussion is that of the relation of episcopacy to the **apostolicity and succession** of the Church. There is a difference between those churches, Orthodox and Roman Catholic in particular, who hold that bishops are a *sine qua non* for visible unity, and who describe bishops as the successors of the apostles and the faithful ‘guarantors’ of the catholicity and apostolicity of the Church. There is clarification needed on the precise meaning of the word ‘guarantor’ used in the Roman Catholic- Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox reports. The Anglican-Roman Catholic report, *Church as Communion*, uses different, but none the less strong language. It holds to the necessity of bishops in succession but eschews the use of the language of guarantee or guarantor, preferring instead to suggest that succession in episcopal ministry is intended to **assure** each community that its faith is indeed the apostolic faith, received and transmitted from apostolic times. ‘Succession in the episcopal ministry is intended to assure each community that its faith is indeed the

³⁴ p. 384.

³⁵ p. 397.

apostolic faith, received and transmitted from apostolic times.’³⁶ The treatment of apostolicity and succession in the Orthodox-Roman Catholic reports moves away from a theory of apostolic succession as tactile succession. Apostolic succession is described rather as being transmitted through local churches, not through an isolated individual, ordained bishop.

It is a matter of succession of persons in the community, because the *una sancta* is a communion of local churches and not of isolated individuals. It is within the mystery of *koinonia* that the episcopate appears as the central point of the apostolic succession... apostolic succession, therefore, means something more than a mere transmission of powers. It is a succession in a church, which witnesses to the apostolic faith, in communion with the other churches, witnesses of the same apostolic faith. The ‘see’ plays an important role in inserting the bishop into the heart of ecclesial apostolicity.³⁷

The refusal to separate the bishop from the community of faith in this understanding of apostolic succession may open the way for a fruitful discussion between churches that have bishops in the historic succession and those who do not.

Just as there are some hopeful signs that future conversation on apostolicity and succession may prove fruitful, so too there are similar signs of hope that progress may be possible on the understanding of a ministry of **universal primacy**. Methodists, Anglicans, Orthodox, Old Catholics, Disciples and Lutherans are among those who can acknowledge the importance of the ministry of a person who can focus the unity of the Church. The Old Catholic-Orthodox report notes the emergence of sees of honour in the early centuries and the bishop of Rome who possesses the primacy of honour in the Church. What is unacceptable is any right to intervene arbitrarily in affairs of a diocese other than his own, any claim to universal jurisdiction, any exercise of primacy apart from collegiality, and any claim to infallibility. ‘This is a term applicable unconditionally only to God...and to use it of a human being, even in highly restricted circumstances, can produce many misunderstandings’, as the Anglican -Orthodox dialogue suggests.³⁸

³⁶ p. 336.

³⁷ p 677,679.

³⁸ p. 89.

Anglicans will need to compare carefully what is said here with their most recent statement with the Roman Catholic Church, *The Gift of Authority*, which does not hesitate to use infallibility of the Church and also of the ministry of the bishop of Rome exercised in concert with the whole Church. The Anglican-Orthodox report makes the point that there is no guarantee of the infallibility of a statement, either of a bishop or a college of bishops, since the truth of a statement is only manifest ‘through the acceptance by the body of the Church.’³⁹ In view of so much support for a ministry of primacy as a focus of unity it would be helpful to have a conversation between those churches that have expressed themselves hospitable to the ministry of primacy, in order to test out whether there is any agreement on how such a ministry should be exercised in the service of the unity of all the churches.

One of the most intractable obstacles between Roman Catholics, Orthodox and other churches remains the question of the **ordination of women**. The Common Declaration between John Paul II and Archbishop Robert Runcie in 1989 was clear. The different practices over the ordination of women ‘prevents reconciliation even where there is otherwise progress towards agreement in faith’.⁴⁰ Roman Catholics and Methodists suggest that further thought will benefit both churches.⁴¹ This is a serious matter if it is to remain an obstacle to greater unity, and particularly so, if the Roman Catholic Church will not allow the question to be explored in its conversations with churches who do ordain women.

- **Morals**

Two recent reports have moved into the area of morals: *Life in Christ*, from the Anglican-Roman Catholic conversation and the Joint Working Group’s, *The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues*, are both important beginnings in this new area. Anglicans and Roman Catholics agree that they share the same fundamental moral values (a necessary mark of visible communion), though there are particular disagreements on marriage of divorced persons; methods controlling conception; abortion and homosexual relations. But these

³⁹ p. 89.

⁴⁰ p. 326 -327.

⁴¹ p. 616

are not seen as at the level of fundamental moral values, but rather an interpretation of practical judgements.⁴² Exploration of moral issues only sends the dialogue partners back to questions of sources and structures of authority. ARCIC suggests that the problem of diverse witness is largely due to the fact that since the sixteenth century paths have diverged with separate structures of discernment and authority leading to the formation of different moral judgements. The importance of the authority agenda – structures, sources and processes of decision making and teaching with authority must become a more and more central part of the ecumenical conversations in the years ahead. As the Evangelicals agree with the Roman Catholics, it is one thing to have a set of principles another to know how to apply them and who is responsible for applying them.⁴³ If churches are to live in visible communion and that communion to be maintained, then there will need to be agreement on how they decide together in the areas of faith, order as well as moral life.

IV Final reflections

We have travelled as long way in this review of bilateral dialogues. I have tried to show both advances and places where obstacles remain. Among the latter are:

- The relation of Scripture to Tradition; At the end of this feast of theological
- Who is Church? Are we seeking within the one Body of Christ to one another?
- Is there a shared understanding of the goal of visible unity or are there competing models?
- What are the constitutive elements of visible unity?
- In the area of ministry we still have issues to face relating to *episcopate* and episcopacy, apostolicity and succession, the ordination of women, the exercise of oversight at every level of the church's life, the ministry of universal primacy; many of these issues are related to the understanding of the relation of the local to the universal.
- Issues of difference in moral life.

⁴² p. 353.

⁴³ p. 404,405.

But now we come to the question I began with which was focused in the different approach of the two Cardinals. I don't think Cardinal Dulles was right to suggest that theological dialogue has run its course. I agree with Cardinal Kasper that there is no way round the continuation of dialogue. We have to work even harder at those issues that remain, some of which we have just identified. But Cardinal Dulles is surely right there is now a burning question for the churches faced with these volumes of dialogue reports. Put crudely it is - 'so what?' What is the result of it all of this conversation, all of this advance in understanding and real friendship between the privileged few? Is the conversation making any practical difference? How are members of the different churches being influenced by these agreements? How is the christological breakthrough between the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox affecting visible communion between these churches? What effect has the Old Catholic-Orthodox conclusion that they had reached a high degree of agreement in sacramental teaching, sacraments and eschatology had on the relationship of these two Communion? What happened to the Reformed-Methodist suggestion that there was sufficient agreement in doctrine and practice for unity? What difference has the Evangelical or the Pentecostal dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church had on their desire to move to closer co-operation in mission? The Declaration on Justification between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics is well known and widely celebrated and Methodists and Reformed are identifying themselves with it, but what difference is it making in practice to closer fellowship in life and mission? A lot of hopes seem to be unfulfilled.

Are the theological dialogues in fact becoming obstacles, simply delaying tactics for those who don't want to lose their own identity and are happy to pile up more and more topics for discussion? Are the dialogues themselves in fact contributing to inaction?

What has become clear is that the churches – all of them- have little understanding of how to respond to the results of theological conversations that they themselves have set up and spent resources on. They have no clear structures to evaluate the results of the dialogues nor to decide on their authority, and no understanding of how to receive the

fruits of dialogue in changed lives, how to receive gifts from others or how to move into changed relationships. The whole exercise of theological conversation and responding to its results teaches us much about the subject of authority, or lack of it in the churches.

Thankfully, there are some indications that theological dialogues can be doors which open up new possibilities. They can be instruments to draw churches into communion, or new relations of closer communion on the way to visible unity. For example the results of the bilateral dialogues made possible the new relations between Anglican and Lutheran churches in Europe, between Methodists and Anglicans in the British Isles, between Anglicans and Moravians in Britain and Ireland, between Lutherans and Roman Catholics world wide. And one of the great hopes for the future that I can see is the publication of the new bilateral agreed statement from Anglicans and Roman Catholic Bishops that Bishop Tony will speak of this afternoon *Growing Together in Mission and Unity*, which takes the convergence and consensus of theological dialogues that we have been talking about and cashes that out in suggestions for changing relations locally regionally and internationally.

These examples are a few which suggest that bilateral conversation must not be allowed to end , or to be kept for the privileged few, but used as the door through which we can travel together towards that unity which is both Christ's will for us and his gift to us.

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