

The Charta Oecumenica: An Introduction

Paper to the Irish Inter-Church Meeting on 11 November 2006
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One of the potentially very positive things to have happened in recent times in the broader ecumenical movement was the publication in 2001 of the *Charta Oecumenica*, a joint Conference of European Churches/Council of European Bishops' Conferences initiative. I believe that we in Ireland must take this document to heart and in fact set in place some way of monitoring our ecumenical life in relation to the ideals set forth in that document. I want to highlight some of the things that are said in the *Charta* and relate them in a broad way to our own experience as Irish churches, expanding, as requested, on reflections already given to the Irish Inter-Church Committee last May.

The *Charta Oecumenica* provides guidelines for the cooperation among the churches in Europe and affirms the need for the churches to strive "to overcome the divisions still existing among us, so that together we may credibly proclaim the message of the Gospel among all people". It's clear here that the *Charta* sees our divisions as impeding the effective proclamation of the Gospel; in more down-to-earth terms, we might say that our divisions as churches only lead people to question the truth of what we proclaim: 'How can Christianity be true? Look at all the divisions. Christians can't even agree among themselves.' Cooperation is an important first step in the direction of allowing ourselves to be more credible, to use the *Charta's* terminology, but cooperation among the churches cannot be the end of the ecumenical journey, rather it is an early step in the journey to unity, a journey that leads from cooperation to mutual commitment to actual communion.

In Ireland we are only too aware of our divisions, but our credibility as churches now very much depends on our ability to witness together and, indeed, to move beyond cooperation to much greater mutual commitment in the service of Christ and in the proclamation of the Gospel. Certainly the more established churches, which are the ones with the history, must show that they can indeed overcome barriers of all sorts and so illustrate that the Gospel we proclaim is the real, powerful and life-giving Gospel of love and peace. Indeed, in the secular sphere in Ireland today, many barriers are being crossed and in some ways we in the churches have some catching up to do. It would be a sad judgement on us if, in the future, historians will look back and say that the main impetus for reconciliation in Ireland came from **outside** the churches. That would be an indictment on us.

The *Charta Oecumenica* reminds us that Europe - from the Atlantic to the Urals, from the far North to the Mediterranean - is today more pluralist in culture than ever before, and so the *Charta* aims to contribute towards reconciling peoples and cultures. Again, in Ireland we are becoming more and more aware of the plural nature of society, both North and South of the border, not least as a result

of EU enlargement. Sadly, indeed, many people see us as not being sufficiently welcoming of foreign people who come to settle among us. 'Ireland of the welcomes, where are you?' it is sometimes asked. The following report appeared in *The Guardian* a couple of years ago:

“Not far from the red, white and blue paving stones, the Ku Klux Klan graffiti and the 'Chinks out' notices scratched outside south Belfast Chinese takeaways, Hua Long Lin was at home watching television when a man burst in and smashed a brick into his face. His wife, also in the room, was eight months pregnant. The couple had moved into the terrace two weeks before. Neighbours expressed regret but one white family told a community worker they couldn't offer a Chinese family friendship in public or they would be 'bricked' too. 'It's like Nazi Germany,' they explained. Northern Ireland, which is 99% white, is fast becoming the race-hate capital of Europe.” (*The Guardian*, 10 January, 2004)

Has it got any better? The answer, it would seem, is No. Last month, the *Sunday Life* newspaper reported: “The 'depressing and shocking' development of Belfast as the 'racist capital of Europe' has been exposed by the UK's leading anti-fascism campaigners. For *Searchlight* magazine has highlighted the 'appalling surge' in attacks against ethnic communities - in a 10-page special investigation, *The Silent War*. Reporter Matthew Collins has uncovered the seamy underbelly of paramilitary-inspired violence - revealing that racist incidents have increased by 15pc in Ulster, in the past year alone. According to PSNI figures, a total of 746 crimes with a racial motivation, were committed in the province between April 1, 2005 and March 31, 2006. (*Sunday Life*, 15 October 2006)

Enormous challenges are emerging for the churches not only in their relationships with one another but also with other faith communities. It may well be, indeed, that the growing numbers of people in Ireland of other faiths will impel the churches to come together to find confidence in living out the Christian faith in a multi-faith society. But the different faith communities can actually work together because Christians not only share many of the objectives of believers of other outlooks but also share the basic motivation that lies in obedience to God. So, for example, shortly before the G8 meeting last year leaders from the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths, in a joint open letter, urged Prime Minister Tony Blair to play "the fullest part" in helping the world's poorest countries. Senior religious leaders from the three faiths came together publicly to urge the Mr. Blair to press for radical commitments on behalf of the world's poorest people prior to his chairing of the annual meeting of the world's richest nations in Scotland in July 2005. The five religious leaders were: the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams; The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor; the Free Churches Moderator, Dr David Coffey; The Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Sir Jonathan Sacks; and the Chair of the Council of Mosques & Imams, Sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi. In Ireland, we should look for opportunities to cooperate actively with other faith communities.

But to return to a more specifically Christian theme, the *Charta Oecumenica* starts out by affirming the unity, sanctity, catholicity and apostolicity of the Church and the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It marks a commitment "in the power of the Holy Spirit, to work towards the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in the one faith, expressed in the mutual recognition of baptism and in Eucharistic fellowship, as well as in common witness and service".

The *Charta* makes it clear that the most important task of the churches in Europe is the common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed. This is an immense challenge as one considers the very diverse nature of European society, and the highly secularised context, but the challenge is also an immensely exciting one. So it is significant that the *Charta* marks a commitment to plan for evangelisation on an ecumenical basis, with the churches reaching an agreed approach and strategy for evangelism.

From our point of view in Ireland, it is significant that the *Charta* recognises the link between ecumenism and reconciliation. Of course, we have long recognised the way in which the churches have been a part of the division and alienation in Irish life, but the example of so many communities of reconciliation over the years of the Troubles is a reminder and a sign to us that ecumenism and reconciliation are indeed inextricably linked. Indeed, one might say that especially over the years of the Troubles, the communities of reconciliation embodied the Gospel imperative, for here Christians were living out the life that we surely believe God wants for all of us.

In the Europe of which we are more and more a part there is a great need for reconciliation on so many fronts. We are, understandably, inclined to think of reconciliation in terms of our own problems within this island, but Europe is awash with situations that cry out for reconciliation. We have all seen what happened not long ago in France, in terms of violence and rioting. In Britain, a few years ago there was public debate about institutional racism in policing; in the former Yugoslavia there are continuing divisions; the question of the rights of minorities and the problems of refugees and asylum seekers also witness to the deep need for reconciliation in Europe as a whole. It is not surprising that the Second European Ecumenical Assembly held in Graz, Austria in 1997 took the theme of *Reconciliation: gift of God and source of new life*. We belong to a Europe that is in much need of reconciliation. Our problems in Ireland are serious, but it is salutary to place them in the context of the great need for reconciliation in other places such as those that are part of the Europe of today.

Indeed, the Final Document of that 1997 Graz Assembly spoke about the challenge of 'letting go' in reconciliation: "Reconciliation is not just a matter of ethical challenges. The idea of letting go and renunciation points to questions at the core of human existence. ... However, as soon as we get used to the fact that we are finite, we become open to the possibilities we have as human beings....

When we learn 'to count our days' (Ps 90.12), we come nearer the measure of our humanity....”

There is indeed, an immense need for reconciliation in our world. So, our experience in Ireland of the need for reconciliation is part of the human experience as a whole. We are not isolated in our need for reconciliation and we must therefore recognise that we have much to learn from others who have found success in their strivings after reconciliation. The first priority in promoting reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and indeed in Ireland as a whole, has been the leaving behind of violence. However, the violence cannot simply be forgotten, for that would be to ignore its legacy in each of us. There has to be a coming to terms with our violent thirty years. That process will require the environment of a true and lasting peace.

Coming to terms with violence, wherever it is, involves understanding and accepting its origins. Violence in the home may have its origins in the homes of parents, may be the result of unhappiness in marriages, of poverty, of alcoholism, of any of a vast number of possible causes. Violence in society at large may have its origins in bigotry and sectarianism or may arise against a background of social injustices, forgetting that violence itself entails a particularly brutal form of injustice. People may have their own, vested interests in violence. And always, always, violence is a most difficult problem to deal with, because unearthing the causes of violence means opening up deep wounds, unhappy memories, troubled pasts.

To return more specifically to the *Charta Oecumenica*, there is also in this document a commitment on the part of the churches "to act together at all levels of church life wherever conditions permit and there are no reasons of faith or overriding expediency mitigating against this; to defend the rights of minorities and to help reduce misunderstandings and prejudices between majority and minority churches in our countries". These are words that have real relevance in our Irish experience, and carry a real challenge to us.

Prayer, of course, lies at the heart of all ecumenism and the *Charta* recognises this when it says that "the ecumenical movement lives from our hearing God's word and letting the Holy Spirit work in us and through us". There is an acknowledgement in the document that in some churches reservations exist regarding praying together in an ecumenical context, but the document goes on to point out that all the churches have many liturgical features in common, especially the Lord's Prayer. Ecumenical services have become a regular feature of church life in Ireland, but as churches we do need to deepen that ecumenical commitment at the spiritual level. Public reaction to the controversial concelebration of the Easter Day Eucharist in the Augustinian Priory in Drogheda, involving the Augustinian clergy and the Church of Ireland rector, surely points to the urgency which faces us as churches in coming to a resolution of the whole issue of Eucharistic sharing. There have been many dialogues on the topic, both bilateral ones between the churches and the multilateral dialogue

of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. But where has all that dialogue actually got us? There is, certainly, a need to strive with redoubled commitment to search for the conditions that will enable Christians to share together fully in the Eucharist.

The *Charta* recalls that through the centuries, Europe has developed what it describes as "a primarily Christian character in religious and cultural terms" and recognises that. The *Charta* states: "The churches support an integration of the European continent. Without common values, unity cannot endure. We are convinced that the spiritual heritage of Christianity constitutes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment for Europe. On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail. We likewise insist on the reverence for life, the value of marriage and the family, the preferential option for the poor, the readiness to forgive, and in all things compassion."

Christians have, however, failed to prevent suffering and destruction from being inflicted by Europeans, both within Europe and beyond. So, there is a need truly to learn from experience. But if Europe has such a primarily Christian character, are the churches doing enough to ensure that Europeans do find their spiritual fulfilment in Christ and are we also doing enough to guard against actual hatred of people of faiths other than ours? We know, from our own experience, that sectarianism has a deeply corrosive influence in society. We are trying to combat sectarianism wherever we can, but we are finding it an uphill task. The question is, Will we find a new form of sectarianism breaking out all over Europe and will we as Irish churches be able to contribute from our own experience, towards the healing that would be needed in such circumstances?

Of course, this issue arises in connection with the question of the admission of Turkey to the EU, bringing a very sizeable Muslim community within the Union. So, the *Charta* indicates: "Muslims have lived in Europe for centuries. In some European countries they constitute strong minorities. While there have been plenty of good contacts and neighbourly relations between Muslims and Christians, and this remains the case, there are still strong reservations and prejudices on both sides. These are rooted in painful experiences throughout history and in the recent past. We would like to intensify encounters between Christians and Muslims and enhance Christian-Islamic dialogue at all levels. We recommend, in particular, speaking with one another about our faith in one God, and clarifying ideas on human rights."

Arguments for and against Turkey's inclusion in the EU have been voiced, but one might note in particular the recent comments of the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church reiterating support for Turkey's entry into the European Union, and noting that such a move would benefit minorities living in the country. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I said: "It is a fact that I personally, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a whole, support Turkey's European perspective..."

We feel that the extension of European (safeguards) on the protection of minorities in Turkey will be extremely beneficial, including to ourselves." Indeed, improving the rights of non-Muslim communities is a key issue Brussels wants Turkey to address in its EU membership talks, which still have some way to go. Finally, I would draw attention to the *Charta* commitment to religious freedom. Sadly, there are many parts of the world where religious freedom is denied. Speaking in Westminster last month, the human rights activist and leading Methodist, Baroness Cox, highlighted three categories of states that deny religious freedom: states that have a communist legacy, such as North Korea; second, states with anti-conversion laws, such as Saudi Arabia, India and Sri Lanka; and third, countries experiencing a growth of militant Islam and Sharia Law states. Indeed Baroness Cox drew attention to plans to create a 40,000-person capacity megamosque in London, with money coming from Saudi Arabia which in turn does not allow the construction of any religious buildings other than Islamic ones, and she referred to the lack of 'reciprocity' in this connection. It is, I believe, right that the *Charta* should emphasize the importance of religious freedom in our world, and I welcome that particular aspect of the document very much indeed. At times, perhaps, we take our freedom to worship and to proclaim our faith rather too much for granted.

In the *Charta Oecumenica* there is much food for thought for us as Christian churches in Ireland. It constitutes a real call to examine ourselves, where we are ecumenically, where we are going ecumenically, setting a standard against which, in the months and years ahead, we can measure our progress.