

Vatican II. A Methodist Reaction.

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If I may have the indulgence, I will begin this paper with some personal reminiscences. My undergraduate years in Cambridge coincided almost exactly with Vatican II. I was fortunate enough to be at King's which, despite its very secular reputation (there were fewer practising Christians amongst both the fellowship and the undergraduate body than in most other colleges) had a small but lively body of very committed Catholic undergraduates. They, fascinated by what was happening in and to their own church, invited those of us belonging to other Christian communions to come and discuss what was happening at the Council. Most of those who responded to the invitation were Anglicans. I was the only Methodist involved.¹

These informal meetings marked the beginning of my ecumenical vocation and experience. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity of exploring in some depth the life of another major Christian communion. My previous knowledge of and contact with Catholics and the Catholic Church had been very limited but was just enough to make me appreciate that what was being said at the Council and what was being written in the subsequent decrees contrasted very considerably with what had gone before.

I had seen a little of Catholic worship from accompanying my very devout French exchange partner to Mass, both in North London and at Vermenton in France. I had learnt from a French book what heretics and schismatics were in the Catholic speak of the time. The latter 'believe that the Church teaches, but do not obey its leaders' and the former 'do not believe that the Church teaches'. Travelling on a bus in my sixth form days, I had picked up a small Catholic catechism that someone had presumably dropped. I was fascinated by it, particularly in three respects. The first was the assumption that God *must* have intended to found a Church which could not err. It seemed that everything in the Catholic Church, including, in particular, the infallible papacy necessarily followed from that. The second was the emphasis on sin, neatly divided into two categories, mortal and venial, the first having dire effects on one's eternal prospects. Finally, there was other unfamiliar jargon such as 'corporal works of mercy' and 'offences crying out to heaven for vengeance', amongst

¹ I should remember, out of due piety towards a much loved and respected teacher, that the late Rev. Dr Alec Vidler, Dean of King's at the time, also played a key role in the fostering of my ecumenical vocation. Only many years later, did I come to know how significant a role he had played in early pre-Vatican II semi-official Anglican approaches to Rome.

which, in my extreme left wing youth, I was glad to note, 'defrauding the labourer of his just wages.'

Perhaps one of the biggest, if relatively trivial, changes wrought by Vatican II was the almost complete disappearance of the traditional language of categorisation of sin. I have scarcely ever seen it referred to in post-conciliar documents, though that may be because I have not looked in the right places.

Perhaps the biggest change that I discerned in comparison with the style and approach of the pocket catechism came when I first read *Lumen Gentium*. I remember being impressed by the careful examination of the biblical metaphors for Church, by the stress on the universal call to holiness and by the emphasis on the laity. Previously, I had tended to accept rather uncritically the view that the laity played practically no role in the Catholic Church whatsoever, except to 'pay, pray and obey' and that their knowledge of the faith was limited to knowledge of the rules that they must obey with regard to mass attendance and to making their confessions. From my first meeting with my Catholic fellow undergraduates onwards, I have come to realise that, by contrast, many Catholic layfolk are both articulate and well informed².

In recent years, I have come to realise the extent to which my early impression that the Council and its documents enshrined a new style of Catholicism was not mistaken and that the question of how far the Council had intended to and had indeed initiated a new era in the Church has been at the heart of much scholarly internal Catholic debate about its legacy. Looking recently at the comments of Albert Outler, senior Methodist observer at Vatican II and doyen of modern American Wesley studies, I realised that, from the beginning, he had anticipated the possibility that contrasting interpretations would be given of it by progressives and conservatives, with both sides wanting to privilege their particular interpretation and ignore features that seemed to go against their argument³. Of course, it is inevitable that any particular document, however carefully phrased, should be capable of varying interpretations. It is also true that any document finally agreed by a group of two thousand will represent a degree of consensus. Furthermore, it is likely that some will see the advances from a previous position in such a document as representing a springboard for further progress whereas others will see the document as representing a thus far and no further approach. To an extent, this was clear even at the time of the Council. My Catholic friends told me of the deep reserve of Cardinal Ottaviani over the proceedings. Equally, it is clear that some hoped, as I gather Rahner put it, that it was the beginning of a beginning and that its momentum would continue into further post-conciliar change.

Re-reading relevant sources for this paper, I was struck by the key formative role of John XXIII. It had been almost universally assumed that he would be a stop-gap Pope, keeping the seat warm for a future longer term and potentially more energetic pontiff. No one had expected him to do anything as dramatic as calling a council, yet he early discerned that reform and aggiornamento were absolutely necessary if the Catholic Church was continue to minister effectively within the rapidly changing world of the late twentieth century. I think I

² This has been my constant experience, through many years as Methodist observer on the Southwark Ecumenical Commission and, latterly, in work with the Clifton Ecumenical Commission.

³ See his *Response to Lumen Gentium*, cited in Abbott, W.M. (ed) *Documents of Vatican II*, (1966) pp. 102-6.

now see John as an ideal church leader, a man who knew that he could not do everything himself, not just because he was already elderly but also because he did not have all the necessary expertise. His ministerial career had been largely spent as a diplomat and his skills in that direction were evident in the advice he gave to people such as Cardinal Bea on dealing with the Curia. He had the grace and wisdom to realise that he needed the help and advice of his brother bishops and that they, in turn, needed that of their periti. He enthusiastically embraced the idea of inviting observers from the other major churches and opened the way to their influencing debates and decrees. In sum, he was a leader who believed that good leadership was about listening to, learning from, and sharing with others, about bringing out the best in others and turning it to the common enrichment and benefit. He lived before the term collaborative ministry came into vogue, but I think he would have affirmed it⁴.

John was indeed a pastor 'after thine own heart', a man both anxious to engage with the world and convinced of the necessity of doing so⁵. According to Robert Kaiser, he 'wanted a world event' not 'an ecclesiastical one', an event 'that would signalise the service of Christ to the world'⁶. He had a strong social justice emphasis.

'Where underdeveloped countries are concerned, the Church presents itself, as it is and as it wishes to be- as the Church of all and especially of the poor. The duty of every man, the impelling duty of the Christian, is to look at what is superfluous in the light of the needs of others, and to see to it that the administration and distribution of created goods are placed at the advantage of all'⁷.

There is a sense in which many of us, both non-Catholics and Catholics were a little naïve in our hopes for Christian unity immediately after the Council. We had seen enormous change in the Roman Catholic Church, at least in terms of the spirit and content of many of the decrees. It was easy to overlook the tensions that were there and almost bound to continue after the Council. Such tensions can be seen in the debates over some of the decrees, for example the Decree on Ecumenism.

Some of the fathers welcomed the strong steps taken towards reconciliation with the separated brethren, Orthodox and Protestant. Bishop Elchinger of Strasbourg called the Decree a 'grace and a blessing'. He said the faults of the Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation had to be acknowledged. The Reformers had not wanted to destroy the unity of the Church; they had wanted to declare anew truths that had been obscured. Catholic rejection of Protestantism had been too sweeping. Cardinal Konig had gone even further in seeing the Decree as initiating a process. 'We should avoid the impression that Catholic

⁴ It may be felt I over idealise John. Bernard and Margaret Pawley in their *Rome and Canterbury* think he was rather naïve, believing that if he showed affection to the Orthodox, they would soon return to communion with Rome. Abbot Butler in *The Theology of Vatican II* (1981 edn) p ix, argues 'he was not a great scholar, and in his personal piety he was an old fashioned Catholic', though he goes on to record his view that John was a saint and 'a man prepared to trust and act on his grace enlightened intuitions.' Ibid, p.14. My positive comments about John XXIII are largely based on Robert Kaiser's *Within the Council. The Story of Vatican II* (1963), pp. 9ff.

⁵ The quotation is from Charles Wesley's hymn, 'Jesus, thy wandering sheep behold', *Methodist Hymn Book* (1933), no 791.

⁶ Kaiser, Robert, *Inside the Council, The Story of Vatican II*. (1963), p.9.

⁷ *ibid*, p.72.

ecumenism is a closed system. We are only at the beginning. Dialogue, together with prayer and the Holy Spirit may lead us to a new aspects and a more profound understanding of it’.

On the other hand, there was continuing deep suspicion of non-Catholic churches on the part of many of the fathers. Archbishop Muldoon of Sidney said ‘We deceive ourselves if we think that all the separated brethren are in good faith. Many of them are like eagles hovering over the Church, looking for what they can destroy’. The Archbishop of Bari was critical of any idea that non-Catholics could be said to enjoy a certain communion’ with the Catholic Church⁸.

Since the Council, there have developed two main ways of interpreting it. The more conservative one has pointed to the important elements of continuity with previous teaching. Even the most cursory glance at the references in any collection of the conciliar decrees will reveal formidable catenae of sources from the early fathers, the earlier councils and previous papal encyclicals. On the other hand, it will also reveal very detailed scriptural references and a very different style of approach to that characteristic of earlier conciliar decrees.

In recent years, particular attention has been given to this contrast in style by a series of scholars who have stressed important elements of discontinuity with the past in the approach of the Councils. This approach has been particularly developed by the American Jesuit, John O’Malley. O’Malley stresses the complete absence of anathemas in the documents of Vatican II. He sees the collective style of the documents as pastoral, encouraging and open to the insights of others. He emphasises John’s positive intentions for the Council, enunciated as early as 1959, that it should be for ‘the enlightenment, edification and joy of the whole Christian people’ and that he wanted ‘a renewed cordial invitation of the faithful of the separated churches to participate with us in this feast of grace and brotherhood’.

O’Malley describes the style of the Council and its resultant documents as being of an epideictic genre, by which he means ‘a form of the art of persuasion and thus of reconciliation’. The tone of the documents was significant with the constant use of terms like brotherhood, dialogue, collegiality and friendship, with an overall stress on service rather than control and the use of a vocabulary on inclusion rather than exclusion⁹.

The previous authoritarian stress of so many early twentieth century Catholic teaching documents was replaced by a stress on reform and renewal within the total pilgrim people of God. The contrast when one looks at previous early twentieth century Catholic teaching documents is all too clear. One can illustrate this by contrasting the famous encyclical *Mortalium Animos* of 1928 with its condemnation of the nascent Ecumenical Movement and its call for unconditional surrender on the part of non-Catholic churches to the Holy See. It was said of non-Catholic ecumenists that ‘you will not find one to whom it occurs with devout submission to obey the vicar of Jesus Christ in his capacity as teacher and ruler’. The conclusion amply illustrates the tone.

⁸ cited in Moorman, J. *Vatican Observed. An Anglican View of Vatican II* (1967), pp. 93-4.

⁹ O’Malley, J.W. ‘Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?’ in Schultenover, D.G. (ed) *Vatican II. Did Anything Happen?*, (2007), pp. 52-91.

'Thus Venerable Brethren (i.e. the Catholic bishops), there is but one way in which the unity of Christians may be fostered and that is by furthering the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it. Let our separated children (note that they are called 'children', not as at Vatican II 'separated brethren') draw nigh to the apostolic see, to see what is the root and womb whence issues the Church of God...to submit themselves to its teaching and government'¹⁰.

The contrast with the language of the Decree on Ecumenism could scarcely be stronger. In its very introduction, the work of the Holy Spirit in the Ecumenical Movement, both amongst Catholics and non-Catholics alike is acknowledged as a common Christian experience. The role of the Spirit in using the other churches as instruments in the salvation of their members is acknowledged in contrast to the previously prevailing view that, whilst non-Catholics could indeed be saved as individuals, it was usually in spite of the errors of their churches. Informed dialogue was to be part of the future relationship if the churches on an equal footing, with the expectation that both Catholic and non-Catholic theologians could 'search together into the divine mysteries and engage in a fraternal rivalry in deeper realisation of the unfathomable riches of Christ'¹¹.

All this was done without abating one whit of the claim that the Roman Catholic Church alone had preserved the fullness both of the means of grace and of the institutions bequeathed by Christ to His Church. It was a subtle but enormously generous restatement of Catholic claims which took into account the need to dialogue and share with others. In the Decree on Ecumenism, the stress was necessarily on inter church dialogue. In *Gaudium et Spes* it was on taking into account the joys, concerns and hopes of the entire human race and of learning from such secular wisdom as could be seen to be compatible with and usable in the service of, the Gospel.

To re-read the Decree on Ecumenism or the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is to experience great joy at the kind and pastoral nature of their approach. It is an approach that is totally in tune with that of the Wesleyan tradition. Authoritarian as John Wesley could be on some occasions, on other he evinced a very pastoral concern for the way in which Christian truth was expressed. Thus we read of him saying that the doctrine of Christian perfection should be preached to those who 'are pressing forward' always by way of promise; always drawing rather than driving'¹².

I now turn my attention to the three documents of the Council that have meant most to me, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

The most fundamental of the three and the one which undergirds the others, particularly the Decree on Ecumenism, is *Lumen Gentium*. What was particularly impressive about it was the way in which it highlighted the fundamentals of ecclesiology which are common to all the trinitarian churches, only subsequently discussing the particular Catholic views of the

¹⁰ cited in Bell, GKA. *Documents on Christian Unity* (1955), p 198.

¹¹ *Decree on Ecumenism*, 9, 11.

¹² cited in Williams, Colin. *John Wesley's Theology for Today* (1960), p. 187.

Catholic Church on the necessary structure of the ministry and particular Catholic emphases such as the religious life and the role of the Virgin Mary in Catholic faith and piety¹³.

Albert Outler, doyen of modern Wesley studies, was one of the observers at Vatican II and he hailed *Lumen Gentium* as 'the first fully orbited conciliar exposition of the doctrine of the Church in Christian history', a document that enhanced the prospects for effective ecumenical dialogue. He praised it particularly for the way in which, by beginning with an emphasis upon the Church as mystery, it had 'lifted the discussion above the level of the purely institutional'. He naturally welcomed the stress on the universal call to holiness as a particular point of rapprochement with Methodism and saw the stress on episcopal collegiality as both a return to patristic practice and experience and an important development within Catholic ecclesiology. He was however concerned about two dangers. The first was that the constitution might be 'interred in the vast mausoleum of ecumenical literature', the second that it might be interpreted piecemeal both by traditionalists and progressives, each insisting on their own interpretation. The first danger, happily, has not really happened and the Constitution is widely studied both within and outside of the Roman Catholic Church. The second prophecy has proved true. Finally, Outler warned that the real meaning of the Constitution had yet to be deciphered and translated into the polity and programme of the Roman Catholic Church. Many would argue this has yet to happen¹⁴.

Outler's positive view is to a considerable extent also strongly asserted and refined by a modern scholar, Prof. Joseph Fameree of Louvain-la-Neuve. Fameree stresses the structure of *Lumen Gentium*. It begins and ends with the trinitarian mystery at the heart of the Church, centred on the trinitarian origin and destiny of the Church. Chapter 2 emphasises the whole people of God, a people messianic, priestly, prophetic and catholic, all equal in baptismal dignity. Only after that, does it deal with the distinction between laity and ordained ministers. In a similar way (as I have already noted) consideration of the universal call to holiness precedes the discussion of the role of those with a specific 'religious' vocation. Chapter 7 on the eschatological character of the Church precedes the discussion of the way in which that eschatological character is manifested in the Blessed Virgin Mary. All of these procedures have made dialogue, particularly with Anglicans and Protestants, easier.

Fameree also stresses that the style of the Constitution is dynamic and open. It stresses the value of legitimate diversity. It stresses that even though the Church subsists within the Roman Catholic Church it is not limited to it. Many elements of truth and sanctification exist in bodies outside it. The one Catholic Church exists in and from the communion of the particular local churches¹⁵.

A particularly important emphasis in *Lumen Gentium*, from the point of view of the Anglican and Protestant churches in general and not just Methodism, was on the position of the laity, whose active role in the mission of the Church is particularly stressed in para 37. The sacred

¹³ There was, of course, a strong move at the Council to have a separate decree on Mariology, a move that was only narrowly defeated.

¹⁴ Outler in Abbott, op cit, pp. 102-6.

¹⁵ See his own article 'Vatican II comme style ecclesiologique' in Fameree, J (ed). *Vatican II comme style* (2012), pp 131-148, where he also sees the later productions of the CDF, *Communio in notio* and *Dominus Iesus* as departing from the spirit of the Council. I record my thanks to Joseph for giving me a copy of the book on my visit to Belgium in July and thus materially aiding me in the preparation of this paper.

pastors are to 'recognise and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the layman in the Church' and to 'willingly make use of his prudent advice'. Furthermore, the right and even duty of laypeople with particular expertise to express their opinion is emphasised.

All of this can still be welcomed by Methodists today. The trinitarian basis of ecclesiology was also strongly asserted in our most recent British Methodist ecclesiological statement, *Called To Love and Praise*.¹⁶ The active importance of the laity has been stressed throughout Methodist history and was re-affirmed in the 1986 and 1988 reports on the ministry of the People of God¹⁷. We have since, in this Committee, done work on the role of Mary within the Church and in the context of its search for holiness¹⁸.

Gaudium et Spes is a document even more relevant today than it was in the 1960's, partly because it anticipates many of the problems that have intensified since. It is clearly grounded in what are, or at least should be, the realities of daily Christian discipleship and witness in an imperfect world.

'The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age, *especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted* (my italics), these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ' (para 1).

Christians are to live on a world map (a message that anglo-saxon churches still need to receive!) and to be concerned especially for the poor and disadvantaged at every level, in their local community, their nation and beyond. They are to remember that each human being is created in the image of God and is to act as 'the neighbour of absolutely every person' (para 27).

Clear lessons are drawn from these principles. In the very same para we read, 'whatever violates human integrity, ...what ever insults human dignity, such as sub-human living conditions...disgraceful working conditions where men are treated as mere tools for profit; all these things are infamies'. Even more clearly (para 69) it is stated that 'the right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone'. It would be good to see the Catholic bishops' conferences reminding all governments in Europe and North America of this principle, urging on them the consideration that their countries, unlike some in Africa and Asia, are in a position to see that *living* wages and pensions can be paid, provided they bite on the bullet of higher tax rates for those who are comfortably above subsistence level¹⁹.

Para 29 stresses that excessive economic and social differences between members of the human family or population groups cause scandal and militate against social justice, equity and the dignity of the human person as well as against social and international peace'. One

¹⁶ *Called to Love and Praise* (1999), para 2.1.9.

¹⁷ This was the case even in the teaching of those classical Wesleyans who most strongly stressed the particular prerogatives of the pastoral office. Methodism, right from the beginning, has made extensive use of the laity, not simply in terms of administration but in spiritual offices, such as those of class leader and local preacher.

¹⁸ our joint statement, *Mary, sign of grace, faith and holiness* (1995), being edited by the late Michael Evans

¹⁹ It is to be noted that the Joint Public Issues Team of the Free Churches (in this case, Methodism, the URC and the Baptist Union) have placed considerable emphasis upon the living wage. This is calculated on the basis of the minimum income needed to afford the recipient the necessities of life in terms of food, clothing and shelter.

may add that this statement has since been powerfully verified by the important study of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have shown that those societies that have less of a gap between rich and poor enjoy not only lower crime rates but even better health amongst *all* social classes²⁰. What *Gaudium et Spes* specifies is relevant to the whole western world, though most particularly to Britain and the USA.

In more recent years, Benedict XVI has criticised the naivety of some of the hopes at the time of the Council. The drafters of *Gaudium et Spes*, however, show a clear awareness that ‘earthly progress must be clearly distinguished from the growth of Christ’s Kingdom’ (para 39), balanced however by the assertion that ‘nonetheless to the extent that it can contribute to the good ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God’). The fathers admitted that the imbalances in the modern world were related to those in the heart of man, a clear admission that the universality of sin does distort human society. A prescient warning against burgeoning consumerism and even more against the idolatry of ‘market forces’ is given in para 63. ‘Many people, especially in advanced areas are so hypnotised, as it were, by economics so that almost their entire personal and social life are permeated with a certain economic outlook’.

Finally, we should particularly note the call of the Decree to Christian prophetic witness on the part of all the faithful. ‘The task of the entire people of God, especially the pastors and theologians, is to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of the age and judge them in the light of the Divine Word’. This call is even more needed than it was fifty years ago, granted the idolatry of a certain style of economic thinking in large parts of the western world²¹.

One could scarcely think of a document more ripe for re-reception, not just within the Roman Catholic Church but within the entire oikoumene. As far as Methodism is concerned, its teaching on social justice and responsibility is entirely consistent with the Conference statements of 1934 and 1949²². In recent years, the Catholic bishops in England and Wales have given something of a lead, both in 1997 with *The Common Good* and more recently with an updated version of it. One feels, however, that the challenges in *Gaudium et Spes* are bolder and more direct. The messianic and prophetic people of God everywhere need to hear and act upon them more fully.

Finally, in this section, we come to the *Decree on Ecumenism*. Of it, Fameree comments aptly,

‘The tone that marks this decree is one of joy, desire, confidence and hope, of openness to the future promptings of the Spirit’²³.

²⁰ *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London, 2009). The authors, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, are medical statisticians.

²¹ The stress on the prophetic role of the whole Church was a key element in the seventh quinquennium of our dialogue on teaching authority, encapsulated in the report *Speaking The Truth in Love* (2001)

²² a matter to which I pointed in my first ever paper for this Committee. The declarations were *The Declaration of the Methodist Church on a Christian View of Industry in Relation to the Social Order* (1934) and *Declaration of the Methodist Church on Christian Social and Political Responsibility* (1949) in *Declarations of Conference on Social Questions*, (Epworth, 1959)

²³ Fameree, op cit, p.140.

It is suffused throughout with a remarkably generous appreciation of the continuing work of the Spirit in the other churches. It was deeply influenced by the thought of Fr. Paul Couturier and other pioneers of Catholic ecumenism who dared to hope for a change of spirit within their own Church at a time when such a change seemed most unlikely. Particularly noteworthy within it are the following points.

The stress in para 3 on the extent to which, after the schisms, 'men of both sides were to blame' for the hardening of poor relationships.

The whole hearted acceptance that 'some, even very many of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church'. This is further complemented later with the even more positive statement 'nor should we forget that whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian...can always result in a more ample realisation of the very mystery of the Church'; indeed, as Couturier realised, it could complement and enhance the catholicity of the Roman Catholic Church itself²⁴.

Perhaps the most important statement from the practical point of view is made at the beginning of Chapter II. 'Concern for restoring unity pertains to the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to *everyone* (my italics), according to the potential of each'. This is a necessary goal, vital to the ultimate full reception of the Ecumenical Movement and one that not merely the Roman Catholic but all other churches struggle to achieve²⁵.

Next comes the link between renewal and ecumenism. There is insistence of the need for continual reformation. It is interesting that, in more recent times, Walter Kasper has stressed the importance of the understanding of the Church as *semper purificanda* in contrast to some ways of understanding *semper reformanda*²⁶. It is important to note that the Decree does insist that there are times when reform is needed of the institutions of the Church, at least those that are seen as purely human. Also striking is the acceptance that past deficiencies in the expression of doctrine 'should be appropriately rectified at the proper moment.'²⁷

Section 7 takes us to the heart of spiritual ecumenism and to the frontiers of a possible form of what we would now call receptive ecumenism. It insists on humility and generosity of love. 'There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart...We should therefore pray to the divine Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity toward them'. This teaching is directly derived from that of Couturier and shows a close resemblance to the earlier teaching of our own Methodist, William Shrewsbury. Those virtues of humility

²⁴ Nevertheless, it should be noted that this is complemented in the next para by an assertion that the full catholicity of the churches of the separated brethren is also affected by their lack of communion with Catholics.

²⁵ A point strongly stressed in the recent Groupe des Dombes commentary on the Lord's Prayer. *Vous donc-priez ainsi* (2011), pp. 149-151.

²⁶ Kasper, W. *That They May All Be One* (2004), pp. 47-8. Kasper contrasts the teaching of Lumen Gentium (8) on *ecclesia semper purificanda* with that of the Protestant reformers on *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

²⁷ Abbott, *Documents*, op cit, p.350, points up the importance of this in footnote 31

and preferring others in honour that are commended by the apostle to his churches as essential in their daily life within the local church are also vital to ecumenical endeavour²⁸.

Paras 9-11 commend dialogue with the separated brethren, making it clear that though the Catholic Church must be true to its claims and clear in exposition of its doctrine, it should seek both to avoid a polemical approach and to come to a real appreciation and understanding of the teaching of the other churches. Strong emphasis is placed on the possibilities of collaborative theological enterprise, almost as if the fathers had been given a vision of the future creative possibilities of dialogue²⁹.

All of the points so far mentioned should be capable of reception and affirmation not merely within Methodism but within the other trinitarian churches.

There were, of course, points at which the fathers hesitated as to how far they could go consistent with previous Catholic tradition. One was over the question of common worship, previously limited just to the saying of the Lord's Prayer.. Now it was said that 'in certain special circumstances' it was allowable for Catholics to join in prayer with other Christians both as a means of petitioning for closer unity and a means of celebrating 'the ties that even now join Catholics to their separated brethren'. However, a delicate balance was also recorded between not using common worship 'indiscriminately for the restoration of unity' and the fact that it could sometimes 'gain a needed grace'³⁰.

It is good to be able to record that, in one direction, the Roman Catholic Church has progressed in its practice beyond this. Many years ago, Bishop Charles Henderson, never a bishop to be in the forefront of suggesting innovation, told the Southwark Catholic Ecumenical Commission that attendance at and participation in non-sacramental services in Anglican and Protestant churches was wholly licit, though the reception of holy communion in such churches still remained absolutely forbidden. A few Catholics have suggested that the latter rule might be modified on special occasions in terms of the principle that 'the gaining of a needed grace commends it', but so far no change has been made.

Related to this is the Decree's position on the eucharist in Reformation and post-Reformation churches as well as in the Anglican case. It is said that these ecclesial communities 'because of the lack of the sacrament of order have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the eucharistic mystery'. Nevertheless, even this statement marks an important change. In 1896, Leo XIII condemned Anglican orders as 'absolutely null and utterly void'. Now it is said that these churches do commemorate the paschal mystery which is at the centre of the eucharist and that further dialogue is needed on a matter that before Vatican II would have been regarded as closed.

It is interesting, in view of this and of the very considerable progress made in ecumenical dialogue with the Anglican and Protestant churches, that the Groupe des Dombes in its most

²⁸ Note the particular link between 'Let all Christ's faithful remember that the more purely they strive to live according to the Gospel, the more they are fostering and even practicing Christian unity' and both Couturier's concept of 'spiritual emulation' and Shrewsbury's 'provoking to love and good works.'

²⁹ Some of them may have remembered the creative thinking involved both in the Malines Conversations and in the work of the Groupe des Dombes, already twenty five years old by the time the Council met.

³⁰ *Decree on Ecumenism*, para 8.

recent report, calls for a reconsideration of the question of mutual eucharistic hospitality between Catholics and members of the Anglican, Reformed and Lutheran churches. Naturally, in the light of the most recent dialogue, we would expect this to be extended also to the Catholic-Methodist relationship³¹.

Conclusion.

So what can a Methodist now say, fifty years from beginning of the Council?

I think the first thing is to record profound gratitude for the Council, which brought the Roman Catholic Church out of a previously self-imposed ecumenical isolation, albeit one already challenged by some courageous and far seeing souls within its bounds. This isolation had increasingly concerned the rest of the Universal Church since it was the literal truth that even a complete reunification of the rest of it, Protestant and Orthodox, could only, numerically and literally, be a 50% unity at the very best. Methodists had shared this concern and at one of the pre-conciliar meetings of Faith and Order, Newton Flew³² had insisted on giving a paper outlining the ecclesiology of the major absentee, quite correctly arguing that its position could not but be taken into account.

One must record one's appreciation of the courage of the fathers in opening up the Roman Catholic Church to listening to those outside of its communion and in having the spiritual acumen to realise that in so doing they were thereby enhancing the catholicity of their own Church, allowing it to receive both from the natural wisdom of the secular world and from the spiritual gifts and traditions of other Christians. They managed to do this whilst still loyally insisting on the gift of the petrine ministry as still essential to the oikoumene. The Council is often and rightly presented as a triumph of *ressourcement*, of a return to the principles of the early Church. At the same time, it was an act of re-reception of those truths of the Christian heritage that had been better retained or better developed within other communions³³.

The action of the Council gave a new élan to the Ecumenical Movement. It also brought immense theological and spiritual resources, particularly from the engagement of so many religious orders in ecumenical work, not just those orders with a special ecumenical vocation, such as the Friars and Sisters of the Atonement or the Paulists, but also the great traditional orders, Benedictines, Dominicans and Jesuits who were now free to intensify their efforts from a convincing magisterial basis in the Council's teaching. Bilateral theological dialogue flourished, not just between Roman Catholics and the other major traditions but also between other sets of partners. In particular, of course, Methodists and Catholics were now able to discover each other and to see in particular how much they had in common, particularly within the three spheres of teaching on the universal call to

³¹ *Vous Donc, Priez ainsi. Le Notre Pere, itineraire pour la conversion des eglises*, Groupe des Dombes, 2011, p. 158.

³² Robert Newton Flew (1886-1962), then Principal of Wesley House, author of *Jesus and His Church* (1937) and also the key theologian involved in the 1937 ecclesiological statement of the British Conference, *Nature of the Christian Church*.

³³ a point strongly anticipated by Couturier who argued that the Orthodox had retained a better sense of the cosmic scope of salvation and that Protestants had certainly been more deeply devoted to the use of Scripture particularly by the laity.

holiness, the missionary nature of the Church and the understanding of Church as communion/connexion.

The enriched understanding of catholicity and the greater appreciation of the gifts of the separated churches allowed the Roman Catholic Church to adopt a new approach to unity, not, as before, based on a simple ecclesiology of return, but one based, as the Catholic bishops of England and Wales made clear in their response to *Called To Be One*, on the idea of a common going forward towards a common convergence into a Church which would not simply replicate the confessionalism of Tridentine and pre-conciliar Catholicism, but would share a common fuller catholicity, affirming and receiving all the riches of the participating churches as belonging by right to the fullness of Christ's body³⁴. It is an approach in which all of us are called to purification of our traditions, to humble reception (and where necessary) re-reception from others. This is a necessary but far from easy task, as *Called To Love and Praise* indicates when it says that great discernment is needed in order to judge which traditions need to be preserved and which need to be let go of³⁵.

The seventh report of our international dialogue was entitled *Speaking the Truth in Love* and one thing that I feel I must ask in love and out of the deep affection and respect that I have for the Roman Catholic Church and so many of its members is this, how far has the élan of the Council actually been maintained since 1965? In some respects it has been magnificently maintained. It was better maintained by the late Pope, John Paul II, than is often allowed by his critics. Both in his willingness to involve Orthodox and Protestants in the rethinking of the exercise of the petrine ministry and in his work on interfaith relationships, John Paul II delivered magnificently³⁶. However, it is also true that the calls of the Council for reform of human structures, such as the Curia, have not been fully implemented. Moreover, the ecclesiological implications of *Lumen Gentium*, particularly in its teaching on the relationship of the local and universal churches, have not been fully followed up in terms of allowing more freedom to local churches over matters where no vital theological principle, as such, is at stake. One feels that, in some cases, not enough listening to ecumenical partners is taking place. For example, whilst Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists, have all accepted that they must seriously explore the claims of the petrine ministry, there is reluctance on the part of many Roman Catholics to accept that it also has limits and that Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants all have serious reservations as to the balance of the way in which it is currently exercised and as to whether it really respects the reasonable discretion of local churches.

A Catholic re-evaluation of the ministerial orders and the sacramental authenticity of the Anglican and Protestant churches is also long overdue. Vatican II replaced the absolutist language of *Apostolicae Curae*, the *absolutely null and utterly void*, with rather vaguer statements such as that in the Decree on Ecumenism that 'because of the lack of the sacrament of orders they have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the Eucharistic

³⁴ *Called To Be One* (1996, republished 2001) was the report of a study undertaken by *Churches Together in England* as to the current state of ecclesiological understanding of the member churches. It was particularly noteworthy for a series of suggestions as to how the churches might move towards closer rapprochement in dialogue.

³⁵ *Called To Love and Praise*, para 4.2.14.

³⁶ Note, in particular, the call in *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), para 96 to the leaders and theologians of all the churches to help him in discerning a way in which the Petrine ministry might be more widely acceptably exercised.

mystery'³⁷. Since then, there have been positive statements such as Benedict XVI's acknowledgment of the 'grace giving nature of the Lord's Supper' as celebrated in the Lutheran tradition.

In a sense the question that the Groupe des Dombes has posed recently and which has been previously cited, on p.9, relates to the interpretation of the Council and the way that it should be authentically interpreted. Was it 'the beginning of a beginning' (Rahner) and did it create a closed or an open system for Catholic ecumenism, as implied by Konig's statement cited above?

We await movement from Rome. Has the time perhaps come for Rome to call a meeting of Catholic leaders and scholars to revisit the texts of Vatican II in the light of the progress made in ecumenical convergence since then? The late Pope called upon the theologians and leaders of the other churches to help him in rethinking a style of petrine ministry which could be more widely acceptable and serve the new millennium³⁸. When Cardinal Kasper's *Harvesting the Fruits* was published in 2009, the PCPCU organised a conference at which scholars from the four partner communions concerned could offer their comments on the Cardinal's conclusions. Would it not be in the spirit of John XXIII's original hope that the Council would be 'for the enlightenment, edification and joy of the whole Christian people' if not merely Catholic experts but also other Christian scholars were to be invited to share in a re-evaluation of Vatican II and its significance for all Christians, not just Roman Catholics?

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³⁷ Decree on Ecumenism, para 22.

³⁸ *Ut Unum Sint*, paras 95-6.