

## **A Paper presented to English ARC by Mgr William Steele.**

### **How my experience of spiritual communion with Christians of other churches has affected my own perception of Eucharistic communion.**

I am going to concentrate on the years since 1984, which are the twenty years when I have been very much involved, by appointment as well as by inclination, with ecumenism at various levels: local, national and international. However, I did not come to these years as a *tabula rasa*; I would like to single out a few items from the previous fifty years that have, I believe, influenced my experience of communion with other Christians.

The first is the simple fact that both my parents only became Roman Catholic shortly before they were married (in 1929). My father came from a Yorkshire Methodist family, not particularly fervent, my mother from a much more strongly Anglican family from rural Worcestershire. My brother and I therefore were brought up in a committed R.C. family, but with an extended family that was (especially) Anglican. As I felt close, not only to my parents but also to my aunts & uncles, this helped to tame extremes of exclusiveness that were all too easy in those days. One of my earliest memories, at the age of five, was a silent disagreement with the boy who sat next to me in my Catholic school when he said "Did you know all Protestants go to Hell?" The fact that I remember the incident is, I think, significant, and was, maybe, the sign of an unreflective sense of 'spiritual communion' even in those days.

At the same time I was a R.C., and firmly so — with all that meant in the 1930s. Again it is perhaps significant that I remember an incident when I was four. An Anglican aunt kindly came to look after me during my mother's illness. She was a conscientious woman, and made sure I said my prayers every night. Unfortunately when she tried me on the Prayer Book *Our Father which art in heaven for thine is the kingdom* I rebelled, and defended the faith in the true spirit of the Reformation martyrs. So there were limits to my ecumenical zeal.

The London parish where I grew up was an English Catholic parish, with little influence of Irish or Italian Catholicism. The clergy, too, happened to be English. Ecumenically speaking, I feel this was providential: naturally our parish was a post-Vatican I Catholic community, strong in its self-identity, proud of the tradition of the martyrs, separate in many ways from the mainstream of English life; but it did not have the cultural baggage (and at times tribalism) that can sometimes bring their own obstacles in a community that has its familial roots elsewhere.

After that, most of my life until 1984 was more marked by 'co-existence' than by 'communion'. I lived in a Catholic 'cantonment' so to speak. There was the Catholic school; then, even in the Army during National Service my Catholicism was a separate thing — at church parades the sergeant would bellow "Jews, RCs, Odds & sods — FALL OUT". And I duly fell out, and was marched off to Mass by a Catholic NCO. After that, university experience was still quite separate. The Cambridge Catholic chaplaincy (indeed, in those days, separate ones for women & men) certainly had no contact with other religious groups, and our

conversations on religious matters with other Christians were usually of the 'Catholic apologetics' variety — almost going back from 'co-existence' to 'competition'.

My theological training in Rome, in the last years of Pope Pius XII, simply reinforced this separateness. In the College we prayed every day for the 'Conversion of England' (i.e. from Protestantism to Catholicism, not from paganism to Christianity), and we were very conscious that we were in the College that had sent back to England some forty or more priests who were martyred for their Catholic beliefs.

Then, in my early years as a priest back here, Vatican II took place, and for me that meant a radical conversion and opening of the eyes: above all regarding other Christians and non-Christian faiths. Yet I also remember, at that very time of conversion, that subconsciously this is what I had realised all the time. It could well be that it was my early family influence, alive and well and biding its time.

From that time my whole attitude and conviction changed — but for years it was very much on the level of theory and belief, not on the level of practice. During my sixteen years teaching theology at Ushaw, I enjoyed a valuable return to Cambridge in 1969-70 for a sabbatical year reading modern theology, including work on the history and theology of ecumenism. I met many distinguished and (in many cases) spiritually impressive people, some of whom I related to very warmly — Anglican and Protestant. There was, then, the 'communion' of friendship, but it was a temporary acquaintance: we were ships that passed in the night. The openness and ecumenical conviction was still a theoretical thing: better informed, but not yet translated into ecumenical action.

This change, and the beginnings of real 'spiritual communion', took place in the mid-1980s, when I was appointed diocesan ecumenical officer, and was already well into my fifties. From then on real and lasting friendships began to grow, and a practical/experiential knowledge of other churches began to grow as well. At every level, from the local LEP and 'Churches Together' to ARCIC, I began to be enriched by the communion that grows imperceptibly through regular (and often boring) meetings, working together at common projects, praying together, socialising together, travelling together, regularly attending the worship (including Eucharistic devotion) of other traditions. I became, in a living and not just theoretical sense, aware of the Christ who lives in others and in their churches.

How did my experience of Eucharistic communion relate to all this? In the quite frequent experience of being present at Eucharists other than RC, and at the RC Mass with colleagues present, I now felt sad and frustrated that I could not receive, or offer, Holy Communion. I will not pretend that this pain was intense (it should have been, but it wasn't) but it was nevertheless real.

What was the cause of this sadness? Above all it was sadness and frustration at our divisions, and no little anger at the apathy that is content to continue with these. It was also sadness that my friends and colleagues were hurt and sometimes felt a sense of rejection because I could not receive or give the Sacrament. There was a sadness, too, and a sense of frustration that so many of my friends and colleagues simply could not accept, and in some cases even

understand the RC discipline: to many of them we were simply wrong. I felt sad that my Church was so often put in the position of 'the bad guy' at ecumenical meetings.

One thing, however, was not the cause of my sadness, and that was the RC discipline in itself. In spite of my real experience of communion with other Christians I was, and still am, deeply convinced that this discipline (in principle at least, not necessarily in detail) is right, because it stems from what I believe to be a true understanding of Church and Eucharist in their relation to each other. In fact, the living experience of communion now co-existing with the experience of my Catholic conviction has increased the sadness significantly. But the sadness is sadness at the divisions, not at the discipline that is merely reflecting those divisions.

It is true, and to me very challenging, that I have sometimes experienced with my friends in other traditions a degree of 'togetherness' in Christ, a sense of sharing common Christian faith and values — being 'in Christ' together in fact — that I have not always experienced at RC gatherings, or indeed at the RC Mass. I remember my experience of being at St Edmund's House (now College) Cambridge, for my sabbatical in 1969-70. A valuable sabbatical, but not because of St Edmund's House! At the time this was still a RC institution. Nevertheless, in those very turbulent and self-questioning days in the Catholic Church I found 'my face did not fit' in that community, at least not for its most influential people, most of them my fellow priests. The rights and wrongs of this are irrelevant here, but the point is that it deeply affected my experience of the RC Eucharist in that place, for the first, and thankfully the only, time in my life. I could not help carrying that experience of 'not belonging' into the Mass, where I was receiving Holy Communion and indeed concelebrating.

The point I am making here, though, is that even in that painful 'boundary' situation my experience of communion with my fellow RCs had another dimension altogether than friendship and congeniality in Christ. That other dimension was the pure 'non-ecstatic' awareness that we were, with all our pathetic weaknesses and immaturity of faith and charity, in the same family of the Roman Catholic Church.

What was the value of that 'non-ecstatic awareness'? Was it any more significant than awareness of belonging to the same club or organisation? I think it must have been, because it was what led to my decision in conscience to receive and to concelebrate, in spite of feeling almost hypocritical. It was a painful 'boundary situation' that is helpful to me to revisit in our present discussion.

At gatherings with Anglican, Methodist, URC and other colleagues, and especially at their Eucharists, I was aware of myself as a warmly welcomed fellow-Christian, and experienced them, beyond doubt, as being one in Christ with me. Another way to put it is that I received Christ from them. This was not just a natural cosy feeling of togetherness: it was a faith experience, an awareness in faith. In fact it was 'spiritual communion'.

Now that I was meeting more and more of my colleagues, especially in the West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council, and above all in frequent, and sometimes very

informal meetings with my fellow Ecumenical Officers, I became very much aware of the depth of faith and prayer in many of them. I now knew experientially what before I had only known intellectually and in theory, that we were indeed one in Christ, and that I was thereby in real communion with the church traditions that had mediated Christ to them. And yet, I experienced the difference as well. There was a dimension missing, painfully missing, that was present (when not much else was present) at St Edmund's House. Our communion was a real and living thing, but because of that missing dimension I did not experience our communion as complete.

The effect of this was conviction that sharing Eucharistic Communion would have been false, acting a part — literally 'hypocritical' What was not false, and was a means of grace, was being actively, prayerfully present at my friends' Eucharists, united in our worship of God, and praying for the barriers (in me, in them, in our churches) to come down, trying to be open to the Spirit at work in their faith and Eucharist. To take that real but incomplete part in their Eucharist was for me what Catholics traditionally mean by a 'spiritual (Eucharistic) communion'.

Yet the questions remain — indeed they have become more pressing and more painful as my ecumenical experience has increased. There are many ways of trying to articulate these questions:

Why am I so convinced of the rightness of the RC discipline (which I believe to be far more than mere discipline) yet equally convinced of my oneness in Christ with my colleagues? Why is it that the more aware I am of the Christ in other Christians, the more I am aware of the wisdom of Christ in my own church's understanding of the inseparability of ecclesial and Eucharistic communion?

What is the theological significance of my experience of identity with my fellow RCs, even when (as at St Edmund's House) I feel alienated from them?

What is the difference between my self-awareness/experience of self as a Christian at one with my colleagues, and my self-awareness as a RC Christian not at one with them? And what relevance does that difference have to the Eucharist?

*So: How has my experience of spiritual communion with Christians of other churches affected my own perception of Eucharistic communion? By making me realise just how anti-Christian our divisions are, and the extent of our poverty in being unable to overcome them.*

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