

Receptive Ecumenism

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It may be worth reminding ourselves of the history and development of 'receptive ecumenism'.¹ It has both ecclesial and personal roots. It is, of course, a development of Catholic ecclesiology, and cannot be understood without the critical gear change of *Redintegratio unitatis* from understanding the true church as being identified solely with the Roman Catholic Church to 'subsisting in' the Catholic Church. The importance of that change in self-identity is underlined by the fact that it also occurs in *Lumen Gentium*. It is not that the Catholic Church thinks of herself as a church amongst churches – she does not. But she now understands herself as necessarily in dialogue with other churches to whom the Spirit has given gifts, and that she is herself less than fully catholic without those gifts. So ecumenism is about conversion and renewal and the exchange of gifts and it is a spiritual exercise. Dialogue is an essential part of that process, which is why post-conciliar Catholicism has expended so much energy in dialogue with partners ranging from the Pentecostal to the Orthodox. The most advanced of those dialogues is the ARCIC process. The history of the relationship between Rome and Canterbury is marked by the tension between a personal warmth that arises from familial recognition and a theological distance which has become all the more marked as the Anglican Communion has shifted its understanding of the three-fold ministry to include women at every stage, and its understanding of sexuality, at least in some parts of the communion, to include those in same sex relationships. Part of the energy of receptive ecumenism flows from its perception that although the ultimate goal of full visible unity is becoming more eschatological by the day, the fact that the work of the Spirit can be recognised in separated partners leads to the possibility of receiving gifts from them. To receive gifts is to be open to change, and therefore to the possibility of creating a new space to move beyond the present impasse.

If there is an ecclesial root, there is also a personal one. In a remarkably personal article Paul and Andrea Murray explore how receptive ecumenism developed as a way of making sense of their experience as Catholics who have both been profoundly shaped by working in an ecumenical environment and being taught by great teachers from other traditions. For both the setting was initially ecclesial – for Andrea with the Catholic Bishops' Conference as a researcher, and then as a diocesan ecumenical officer and a part-time pastoral tutor in an Anglican college, for Paul as a teacher of theology at Ushaw where he had responsibility as a Catholic staff member alongside Anglican and Methodist colleagues for a compulsory course on 'Church and Ministry in an ecumenical context'. Both found themselves asking what the grace they were experiencing through their experience of other ecclesial communions meant for them as Catholics. There were striking similarities with spiritual ecumenism, which also articulated a sense of ecumenical hospitality and fruitfulness, but they felt that there was more.

Ecumenical learning is not just individual, it is also collective, and deeply structural for we can learn from each other about things like the ways in which we make decisions as churches, exercise leadership and organise stewardship, as well as the more obvious areas like spirituality and liturgy where we've been happily thieving magpies for a couple of generations. Once Paul moved to a post at Durham University this experientially based intuition developed into a major international interdisciplinary academic programme.

It has been the subject of three major conferences. The first, in 2006, sought to explore how the methodology might work within the Catholic Church, the second in 2009 asked whether it could be applied across differing Christian traditions, and the one that has just taken place has considered it in international perspective, asking what it might mean to take specificity seriously. The papers from the first conference have been published by OUP as *Receptive Ecumenism and the call to Catholic*

¹ Paul Murray 'Receptive ecumenism and Catholic learning' in Paul Murray (ed) *Receptive ecumenism and the call to Catholic learning* (OUP Oxford 2008) pp 5-29; Paul Murray 'Introducing Receptive Ecumenism' in *The Ecumenist* vol 51 no 2 Spring 2014 pp. 1-8; Paul and Andrea Murray 'The roots, range and reach of receptive ecumenism' in Clive Barrett (ed) *Unity in Process: reflections on ecumenism* (London, DLT 2012) pp. 79-94, at pp 80-86

Learning. The papers from the second are on the way, and the organisers are considering various publication options for the third.

Paul Murray's view is that Receptive Ecumenism is now a strapping teenager who needs to be kicked out of the academic house into the wider church world, or to change his metaphor, he thinks it is a virtuous virus which will take root and spread. He is careful to insist that it is neither the whole of ecumenism, nor the sole methodology, but he is clear that at this ecumenical juncture it should be the dominant chord of the movement.

So, what of the conference? We met in the spacious, beautiful campus of the Jesuit's Fairfield University in Connecticut, and its Egan chapel, which traces the life of St Ignatius in its iconography, provided a base for varied and helpful worship. Delegates came from across the world, a mix of academic theologians, church leaders and professional ecumenists. Any such conference is hard to summarise, and in a quite proper way, we will have to wait for the publication of the papers before we can assess it judiciously. However, I want to draw attention to three themes which I think deserve our attention. The first is what Paul Murray called 'specificity', or what we might also call context. The second is to discuss the presentation of the in-depth research project on receptive ecumenism in North East England, and the third, briefly, to ponder how far the method might benefit other areas of theological interest than ecumenism.

First, specificity. John Gibaut, the Faith and Order Director of the WCC, with tongue only slightly in cheek, put his finger on a major tension, when, in the opening plenary, he noted the different attitudes to theological reception between the so-called 'NATO-ecumenism' of the north and west, and the global south. As the conference evolved, it became clear that Receptive Ecumenism was a method which has flourished in the NATO region, especially if one can count Australia as honorary NATO. That division, he thought, would be very significant within a decade.

The Canadian Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue was chosen as the example of RE in the North American. Don Bolen, the RC Bishop of Saskatoon, Linda Nicholls, the Anglican Suffragan Bishop of Toronto and Professor Catherine Clifford of St Paul University Ottawa led the panel discussion. It was clear that this was a formidably successful process which grew out of friendship, admiration and pastoral co-operation. It operates not just at the level of academic theology, but also as a dialogue between bishops. That had helped them produce both *Guidelines on interchurch marriage* (1980s) and a common policy for the transfer of clergy between the two churches. The relationship between the national church and the universal church was also one of healthy two way traffic – Canadian ARC both receives documents and produces them. All that good news didn't mean that the journey was without its strains - the ministry of women clearly remains a stumbling block, and unilateral action by one dialogue partner can result in problems for the dialogue partner as when Anglican policy changes about human sexuality lead to Catholics being bewildered by what appears to be the rapid pace of change in moral teaching.

As they reflected in discussion, the Canadians and noted that the ease and comfort of their relationship reflected their history. They do not have the history of division between them that (say) Catholics and Lutherans in Germany share.

If Canada provided one example of the success of the method, South Australia was another. The South Australian Council of Churches shared their handbook on the subject, *Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands*. Following Paul Murray's visit to Australia and New Zealand, they discovered in receptive ecumenism a method which moved beyond the individual change of heart of traditional ecumenism, to a corporate experience of change which could work at a variety of levels – local church, agency or Synod, Bishops' Conference etc. They quote Murray - 'Receptive ecumenical awakening is properly a matter of the heart before it is the matter of the head; a matter of falling in love with the experienced presence of God in the people, practices, even structures of another tradition and being impelled thereby to search for ways in which all impediments to a closer relationship might be overcome.'² Their experience is that a Council of Churches which had almost run into the sands has been re-invigorated by RE.

² *Healing gifts for wounded hands* (SACC 2014) p2

That positive experience was counter-balanced by presentations from Latin America, Africa and Asia. The most probing, interesting and disturbing was the consideration of Catholic and Pentecostal learning in relation to Mariology in Latin America by two Latino theologians, the Catholic Peter Casarella and the Pentecostal Nestor Medina.

Marian devotion is an explosive issue in popular devotion and culture in Latin America, where Pentecostals perceive Catholics to be worshipping Mary rather than Jesus. At the level of theological dialogue (the Roman Catholic - Pentecostal dialogue has been continuous since 1972) a measure of consensus, if not agreement, has been reached. Mary can, for example, be understood as a model of the charismatic life. However, popular devotion operates in a very different way - Medina suggested that the devotional pattern reflected the struggles of the people, simultaneously liberative and colonially repressive. In Latin America then, receptive ecumenism struggles to be translated from academic theology into the realities of church life. Culture, as Juan Gomes of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity noted in his response, needs to be taken just as seriously as theology, and he also (fairly) pointed out that the papers were presented by Latino scholars who were working a safe distance away in Northern American Universities. In the concluding panel at the end of the conference, Gomes went further and aired his doubts about the applicability of RE in this specific context, although he could quite see how it would work, for example, in ARCIC.

From Latin America we continent-jumped to Africa where Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator SJ, the Jesuit Provincial of East Africa, gave us a sketch of both the heritage and future of African Christianity. It was inherently ecumenically ambiguous because of the shockingly diverse colonial introduction of Christianity into the continent. It was as if it was programmed to divide, and its experience of ecumenism was not so much about reconciling divided denominations as uniting Christians to deal with injustice, HIV, AIDS and political concerns like election monitoring. There was little experience as yet of receptive ecumenism, but the ground was fertile because Africans have a deep ethic of hospitality and mutuality, and there is much informal ecumenism going on which needs to be weighed in the balance against the lack of formal ecumenism. Bishop Tangatenga agreed, noting that ecumenism was a lived experience in Africa, from below rather than above. That would work in Africa, whereas reception is normally modelled as a magisterium imposed from above. That might suit the North and the West, but it wouldn't work in the South.

Asian Christians too have developed their own ecumenical methodologies. They have established a native rather than a colonial identity, and for this reason they stand with the weak and powerless. Compassion for the suffering is of great importance. Japan offers an example - although Christians make up just 1% of the population, they have ploughed resources into schools, hospitals and universities for all, which are widely respected and used. Asian ecumenical methodology though is about a triple dialogue with the poor, with other faiths, and with the culture. It is not focused particularly on church to church relationship.

Canada and Australia have clearly taken the methodology to heart, and found it easy to weld it in to their previous ecumenical histories of encounter. In the global south, the potential of receptive ecumenism is very different. From a global, catholic perspective, it might be a useful arrow in the quiver, but it is not the only one.

England, I want to argue, is half way between NATO and the global south ecumenically, which has implications for the on-going five year research programme with the churches of NE England - the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican dioceses of Newcastle and Durham, the Newcastle and Darlington Districts of the Methodist Church, the Northern Baptist Association, the Northern Synod of the United Reformed Church, the Northern Division of the Salvation Army and the Assemblies of God, which the Durham team presented at Fairfield.

The principle behind the project was to ask each church / group what kind of organisational enrichment they seek to obtain and to discover whether than can be obtained from the good practice of other groups. The research mapped the particular practices and cultures of each denomination in 3 areas:

- Governance and finance
- Learning and formation
- Ministry and leadership.

The inter-disciplinary research groups used a variety of empirical methodologies - interviews, questionnaire and participant observation - to identify how each tradition might learn from another participant tradition. There were six phases to the research - a 'mapping' of what was happening on the ground in each denomination, which was then tested across trajectories with a view to identifying further issues. The third phase was to drill down into congregational studies in each participating denomination to assess how they were coping with decline and the need for fresh structures. After this the fourth phase was the creation of an integrated report of empirical findings on each of the denominations which identified strengths and weaknesses of each denomination and then recommended areas for ecumenical learning.

Following that, the recommendations were tested by using methods from non-theological disciplines, so that the team could measure whether there was sufficient time, resource and willpower to enact the recommendations. The final phase is dissemination and publication.

Marcus Pound then summarised the very particular context of post-industrial NE England where denominations are in decline, the age profile of both ministry and laity is increasing and the number of worshipping centres is being rationalised. He then gave some examples of the ways in which the process worked. The Catholic church had an issue of decline in numbers and the lack of lay roles for participating in the governance of the local church. Recommendations to them included introducing into the council of laity '...an obligatory model of consultation with deliberative modes of governance which retain nonetheless the executive function of the Bishop', which draws on Methodist and URC experience. The URC is trying to shift its identity from ecumenism to mission, and needs to develop lay leadership. The recommendation to them is to explore the ways in which diaconal ministry functions in Catholic, Methodist and Anglican traditions.

The Revd Rowena Francis (formerly Moderator of the URC's Northern Synod) commented on the research from the point of view of one of the denominations involved. She began by drawing attention to the extensive amount of research that had been undertaken and to the riches that could be mined from it in due season. In the meantime, she limited herself to three illustrations. The process was timely from the URC's point of view because they were undergoing a structural change which necessitated a new grouping of congregations, and the research highlighted the need for more hierarchical decision making, and the ways in which pastoral support could be made available.

The learning and formation strand uncovered the dominant strand in congregational thinking of the church as a family or club. Learning is therefore about a sense of belonging and mutual care. If the church is to move towards a model of mission that metaphor needs changing to yeast, or flavouring, or a service station. Finally, she drew attention to the ministry of elders in the URC and pondered if the URC could helpfully receive from other traditions by exploring their understanding of eldership with those who have diaconal orders of ministry.

I was there to respond to the presentation, and I think the following comments might help TUG. There is clearly a great deal of potential to mine this material for new insights into the workings of RE once it becomes available to researchers. It seems to offer a process which may well be a way forwards. If it is to become that, however, it will need to be translated out of the university consultancy model and into vernacular church.

It is also worth noting that post-industrial North East England is a particular culture. Context can be constricting both geographically and sociologically. More broadly in England the ecumenical scene is bewildering and complex, largely as a result of migration. It is not that migration will have an effect on Northern European ecumenism in ten years' time as John Gibaut thought, it is happening now on the streets of our cities. Indeed, it is questionable how relevant or useful distinctions like 'Northern European' and 'Southern' are in discussing English Christianity because a new pluralist reality is abroad. We have 43 member churches, 40% of which are either charismatic, Pentecostal, Afro-Caribbean or African initiated or a mixture of all or some of these. In other words the scene has changed, and the methodological issue for Receptive Ecumenism is clear. Those newer churches do not share in the DNA, nor do they share the burden of its failure between 1960-80 to produce the impossible 'great church' which so bedevils the English ecumenical imagination.

Decline and entropy may well, as the research shows, be the experience of the North Eastern churches. However, according to another Durham based research group led by David Goodhew,

since 1980 English churches have been experiencing decline and growth simultaneously. The growth is broadly amongst 'new' churches, and decline amongst the historic denominations, although it is more nuanced than that. What is clear is that a broader, and deeper, process of change is going on in English Christianity than simply 'Ecumenism or die.'

The inter-disciplinary base of the North Eastern churches is significant and important. If, as David Ford says, theology should be the most promiscuous of disciplines because it is about God's extraordinarily fecund generosity, then working across these boundaries should become normal. The ecclesial realities of governance, ministry and formation - cannot be properly grasped without an appreciation of such disciplines as history, sociology, management theory and psychology. Organisations behave in remarkably similar ways which can be studied and analysed using secular disciplines. They have a propensity to make the same mistakes in exactly the same way.

It is also worth noting that the advent of Receptive Ecumenism into English ecumenical discourse is warmly to be welcomed because it is a deeply Catholic methodology. Indeed, it might even be said that it represents the maturing of Catholicism into sharing the intellectual leadership of ecumenism. That in itself should be a liberation of ecumenism, at least in England, from the given (if mistaken) understanding that ecumenism is a pan-Protestant ideology expressed in pan-Protestant language.

Finally, something completely different, and you will be relieved to know, very briefly. Sometimes one paper impresses particularly. That experience was mine on the Friday morning when Francis Clooney SJ of Harvard reflected with great insight on what his own discipline of comparative theology might both contribute to and receive from receptive ecumenism. His own expertise is Hindu-Catholic theological conversation and he probed the ways in which dialogue and RE mirror each other. He considered that there was 'an ecumenism of life', of cultures co-existing in such a way that they moved beyond polemics to mutual respect. That was followed by an 'institutional stage' which was marked by the production of statements, the pursuit of dialogues and the discovering of stumbling blocks. The third stage is 'receptive', aiming at asking what our own tradition has to learn from the other. That stage was essential to growth. RE was opening up a model of change. Interreligious dialogue, he suggested, follows the same pattern. However, although methodologically similar, the histories of RE, inter-faith dialogue and relationships (eg. with indigenous peoples) are different. For example (and rather obviously) 'That they may all be one..' doesn't work as a goal in inter-religious dialogue.

Comparative theology as a discipline was about theologies engaging seriously with another tradition - its texts, images and practices. It is a way of dialogue, but of a specialised academic kind. Yet it is receptive, an act of crossing the boundary and learning from the other, and being changed.

The concept of facing up to our wounds and repenting of them, which is important to RE, is absolutely necessary and not a problem in dialogue - it arises from reading and studying texts together. What is important is the 'habitus' of studying each other's traditions.

He ended by asking 'Where do we go from here?' He suggested three stages. First, there is the study itself, and we are changed by it. Second, you discover that the more you know, the more the boundaries get mixed up - that is true of RE. Third, he asked, is there an analogy of eucharistic sharing / unity which can be applied to other religious communities? What kind of unity is that?

That is just a flavour of a rich experience. In a sense, what we encountered was what we already know, that specificity is a major theological determinant. The gospel always needs to be inculturated, yet for all that it remains the gospel, inherently other, questioning our assumption, maybe even our cultural assumptions. Receptive ecumenism will, I suspect, be a particularly helpful tool in the NATO area, and between churches that share a common woundedness. It might even help unblock some log-jams there. The bigger question is whether it can transcend that, and by the radical humility of reception and receiving, contribute to the wider ecumenical task of reconciling old and new, northern and southern, especially when they are on the same English High St.