

Lecture no. 6, Gdynia

The Way Forward

Many principles concerning the way forward out of division and fruitless controversy are in fact simple principles for all Christian life. For example, the importance and the centrality of love, and the refusal of all judgmentalism. Of these common Christian principles, I want to highlight one that has not been applied enough to ecumenical method. It is the requirement that for the healing of any relationships, there must be a confession of sin by all parties. There has in fact been real progress on this issue since 1993 – 94, when for the first time, Pope John Paul II clearly summoned Catholics to a confession of the sins of the past, mentioning especially (1) sins against unity and (2) sins of violence committed in the name of truth. This was in the context of the Catholic Church's preparation to celebrate the Great Jubilee Year 2000.

However this repentance has not yet really been received into the ecumenical process as an indispensable step. Why? First, ecumenical dialogues typically address doctrinal issues, and no one has seriously taken up the sin-element in doctrinal divisions. Most of the acts of confession that have taken place concern sins of violence, e.g. by the Crusaders (as with JP2 to Archbishop of Athens in 2001), by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, etc. Second, many thought this was just a special thing for the Jubilee year, not understanding that it is and will remain a fundamental element in ecumenical method. However, we might note that as far back as the 1930s a major Catholic ecumenical pioneer, the Abbé Paul Couturier from France, had advocated the necessity of repentance for the healing of divisions. He spoke of the need for constant deeper conversion, both personally and collectively, a teaching that found expression in the Vatican Two Decree on Ecumenism, para. 6 – 8. In France an informal dialogue group of Catholics and Reformed, called the Groupe des Dombes, has met for over 60 years and since 1970 has produced a number of remarkable documents, for example the 1991 statement, *Pour la conversion des Eglises*.

I do not believe that there is any division without sin. Where there have been doctrinal conflicts, each side needs to ask: What was sin in our attitudes? Where was there disobedience to the Lord? Where was there stubborn attachment to our own theological ideas? For example, with the Reformation conflicts about the Eucharist: particularly concerning the issue of memorial or sacrifice. In fact, the Catholic theology of that period was not sufficiently biblical anchored and it did not make clear enough how Calvary is a once-and-for-all unique event, never to be repeated. There was sin here, and it needs to be confessed. Similarly with the issue of Mary: there have been exaggerations on the Catholic side

that have fuelled Protestant fears. They too need to be confessed.¹

To this mutual need to confess our sins we need to add a further principle: The Catholic (Orthodox) Church must begin the repentance. The sins against division began with distortions and abuses in the ancient Churches. They need to confess their sin first, because their sin came first. Only this Catholic confession will get beyond the deep Protestant suspicion and fear that the Catholic Church might use their confessions to prove that they were always in the right. Humility is never misplaced. Humility disarms the opponents.

Five Requirements for Real progress towards Unity

The way forward has, I believe, to be anchored in the following five principles:

I: The Way Forward has to be Totally Centred on Jesus Christ

Jesus is unique. The unity of the church is rooted in the confession of the uniqueness of Jesus.

An ecumenical renewal of church requires a re-centring on the person and work of Jesus Christ, and a purification from all forms of personal and corporate identity that were grounded in opposition to others rather than faith in Christ.

The relationships between the Christian churches must be based on their common faith in the person of Jesus Christ and their common confession of his uniqueness.

The uniqueness of Jesus has many facets. Jesus is the only saviour: “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4: 12). Jesus is the one mediator: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2: 5 – 6). Jesus is the one high priest: “For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” (Heb. 9: 24). These roles all express the meaning of Jesus’s words “I am the way” (John 14: 6). They concern our access to God, and the means by which God has made this access possible. These images speak of the “narrow gate” (Matt. 7: 13), the narrow gate, first of the incarnation and then of the blood and cross of Jesus, by which alone we can enter into the spacious pastures of the kingdom of God and the many rooms of the Father’s mansion. The uniqueness of Jesus as means and cause of salvation has been at the heart of the Protestant witness

¹ “The Second Vatican Council has already authoritatively denounced both the exaggeration of content and form which even falsifies doctrine and likewise the small-mindedness which obscures the figure and mission of Mary. The Council has also denounced certain devotional deviations, such as vain credulity, which substitutes reliance on merely external practices for serious commitment. Another deviation is sterile and ephemeral sentimentality, so alien to the spirit of the Gospel that demands persevering and practical action.(106) We reaffirm the Council's reprobation of such attitudes and practices. They are not in harmony with the Catholic Faith and therefore they must have no place in Catholic worship.” (Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, para. 38).

since the time of the Reformation. While this uniqueness is also affirmed in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the importance of preaching the singularity of Christ has been a more typically Protestant emphasis.

But the unique role of Jesus is not limited to how we enter the church and the kingdom. Jesus is at the centre of the Father's plan fashioned before the beginning of creation. "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him." (Col. 1: 15 – 16). The unity of the church is rooted in the Father's one plan centred on his one Son. Paul calls this plan the "mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3: 4; Col. 2: 2). This plan is for unity, unity in Christ himself. "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph. 1: 9 – 10).

So the unity of the church, that is a sign of the unity of the coming kingdom, is not only a unity through Christ, but it is essentially a unity in Christ. Jesus is goal as well as means. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22: 13). Paul uses the word fullness (*pleroma*) to describe the goal towards which the Spirit of God is leading the church, humankind and all creation. According to Paul, the church is "his body [i.e. of Christ], the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1: 23). This body is to be built up "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4: 13). Through Jesus Christ, we are in Jesus Christ, and we are destined for the fullness of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is both means and goal. In Jesus we have access, and his presence in us now is the pledge and hope of the coming glory, which will be the fullness of Christ.² The fullness of the mystery of Christ and his indwelling in the church and in the Christian have been emphases characteristic of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The Protestants have been nervous of the mysterious and the mystical, typically seeing these elements as cloaks for superstition and syncretism. Only the constant affirmation of Jesus as the unique means will overcome these fears and will ensure that there is truly progress towards the authentic fullness.

When we situate our church communities before the all-holy Lord we can no longer act as though our church is perfect and is not in need of profound renewal. We can no longer live in the unreality of pre-ecumenical conflicts when we compared our theoretical ideal with the (exaggerated) weaknesses of the others or when we contrasted our actual best with their worst. As the unity of the church is grounded in the crucified Christ, the approach of all Christian churches and communities to each other must follow Christ in standing stripped and naked before the Father, renouncing all pride in one's history, all concern about ecclesial reputation, not relying on title or status but standing on relationship with Jesus and the Father in the Spirit. An authentic renewal requires a willingness to suffer with Christ as we are obedient to his teaching and his word.

² The role of the "one hope" in an ecumenism of the Spirit will be examined in more detail in Chapter Seven.

The reconciliation of separated Christian churches and communities requires the mutual honouring of each other's Christian heroes and martyrs.

II. It has to be Shaped, Led and Guided by the Holy Spirit

Five key roles of the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit always confirms the previous work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, as well as the work of the Holy Spirit in all movements of revival, reform and renewal.

The Holy Spirit always highlights the core of Christian faith, that is centred on the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, the Saviour of the world, the coming King.

The fresh coming of the Holy Spirit in renewal will expose what is unholy in the church, and what is not in God's right order.

In the encounter between divided Christians, the Holy Spirit reveals what is holy and godly in the other tradition.

As the Holy Spirit renews the church, the Spirit will restore elements of the biblical and apostolic heritage that have been forgotten or neglected.

Questions that follow:

In the other Christian body that we encounter, what are the most sure signs of the work of the Holy Spirit? What we recognise as the work of the Holy Spirit, we must honour as the work of the Holy Spirit and seek to understand its foundation in the biblical revelation.

What are the implications for the life of our church of this work of the Holy Spirit now identified and honoured in the other?

What are the ways in which our churches/movements/faith communities, including ourselves, have sinned against other Christian churches and groups? [See repentance section above].

III. The way forward has to be deeply biblical, that is rooted and grounded in the Scriptures of Old and New Testaments.

All Renewal of Christian Life has to be Based on a Return to the Common Sources in the Scriptures.

Treat the biblical text with reverence as the Word of God.

See all parts of the biblical text as part of a bigger whole.³

Jesus Christ is the interpretative key of all the Sacred Scriptures.

The Scriptures are inherently life-giving.

Read the Scriptures within “the living Tradition of the whole Church”⁴

Fidelity to the Scriptures is a dimension of fidelity to the covenant-making God.

IV. The Way Forward Recognizes the Foundational Role of the People of Israel [the Jews]

To read the whole Bible freed of every “replacement” perspective that substitutes the church for Israel

It has to be rooted in the biblical pattern of the one chosen people of Israel, who are chosen to bring blessing to all nations. That is to say, to have a right and biblical understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Church – neither the Church replacing disobedient Israel nor a Judaized Church.

The unity presented in the New Testament is a unity in diversity, that is most powerfully represented by the model of “the one new man”, of Jew and Gentile made one through the cross (but being united as Jew and Gentile by the destruction of the “wall of hostility”): Eph. 2 :12 - 22

To read the New Testament in the light of the Old.

To identify the distinctively Jewish components that were not abandoned in the New Testament, but which a replacement exegesis later caused the church to neglect or forget.

One of the clearest challenges from the Jews, and especially from Jewish believers in Jesus, concerns the Messianic hope of Israel. The whole faith of Israel was rooted in remembrance of the covenants and the promises (faith relating to the past) and oriented towards the fulfillment of those promises (faith relating to the future which generates hope).

The hope of Israel was a this-worldly hope: for the salvation and deliverance of this creation beginning with Israel, for the establishment of the rule of righteousness in the land of Israel and throughout the nations. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus opened up the heavenly dimension. But in the new Testament, the hope for this world and this creation is not transferred, but the total fulfillment of this hope awaits the second coming of the Lord Jesus in glory.

V. The way forward has to have a strong orientation to the Coming of the Lord Jesus in glory.

³ See the first criterion proposed by the Second Vatican Council for interpreting Scripture: “Be especially attentive 'to the content and unity of the whole Scripture' (CCC, para. 112).

⁴ CCC, para. 113.

In Ephesians, Paul writes that there is “one hope” (Eph. 4: 3). This hope is expressed by all Christians in the acclamation: “Maranatha: Come, Lord Jesus”.

A church that does not cry out for the Lord to come in glory will never grieve deeply over the division between Christians. An ecumenism without eschatology will never possess any lasting dynamism. A renewal that does not cry “Maranatha” will not touch the heart of the church’s malaise. For the cry “Come, Lord Jesus” expresses the deepest longing of the church formed by the Holy Spirit.

Recovery of a strong eschatology is inseparable from the re-connection with the Jewish roots. The New Testament describes how the Jewish disciples of Jesus took up and re-shaped the “hope of Israel” in the light of the mission, the death and the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. So the New Testament is full of the hope for the final fulfilment of all the promises given throughout the history of the chosen people. There is probably more teaching in the New Testament on the coming of the Lord than on any other subject. Through the coming of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the hope of Israel is intensified, more clearly identified and advanced. The hope of Israel becomes the hope of the church, understood as faithful Israel joined by the ingrafted Gentiles.

The Holy Spirit places a longing in our hearts for the coming of the Lord and this final transformation. This longing is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We may say, the longing is the Holy Spirit in us, manifesting the total commitment of God to the fullness of salvation and to the reign of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is like a coiled spring – except that the spring’s bursting open is constant. The Holy Spirit is like God’s arrow, expressing God’s total orientation towards the one target. The longing of the Spirit poured into us is so strong that we “groan” from the depths of our beings: “here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor. 5: 2). The groaning issues from the depth of longing for the completion and for decisive deliverance in the midst of the travails of this world. The prayer of groaning is itself part of the birth pangs of the coming kingdom. It is the Christian's cooperation with the Holy Spirit in the work of preparation. The Lord will come when the groaning has reached the necessary intensity and extent – in fact when it comes forth from the one church that will result from the reconciliation of Israel and the church.