

Moving Towards a New Stage in Ecumenism

BRENDAN LEAHY

IN HIS recent work, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology*, Paul Avis has argued the ecumenical movement is ripe for reform and renewal.¹ There are other voices too across all the traditions that have expressed similar views. A hundred years on from the Edinburgh 1910 Conference, such a renewal is probably timely! The Holy Spirit, the great protagonist of the Ecumenical Movement, is always going to nudge us on a little. In this article I want to offer a simple reflection on aspects of a new stage in ecumenism.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS IRREVOCABLY COMMITTED TO ECUMENISM

Just recently the Catholic Church celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation by Pope John XXIII of what today is the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. It was a chance to name and recognise what been achieved in those years. And rightly so. We are light years away from where we were fifty years ago! The Catholic Church

1. Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010).

Brendan Leahy, a priest of the Diocese of Dublin, is professor of systematic theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth. He also serves as confessional lecturer at Irish School of Ecumenics (1999–present), secretary of the Advisory Committee on Ecumenism of the Irish Bishops' Conference (1999–present); member of Inter-Church Meeting (1999–present) and of Three Faiths Forum of Ireland (1999–present); chairman of Dublin diocesan ecumenical committee in Dublin diocese (1999–present); member of ITA (2005–present); corresponding member of the Pontifical Theology Academy (2004–present); co-chair of the Theology Forum of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting (2010–), and as a visiting lecturer at the Sophia University Institute, Loppiano, Florence

is irrevocably committed to the search for unity. We can never repeat that enough.

For the past ten years one of my tasks as secretary of the Advisory Conference of the Episcopal Conference was to draw up a summary report of ecumenical initiatives in Ireland. It wasn't a difficult task because each year ecumenical officers from around the country could provide a plethora of such initiatives, from choirs of different churches coming together for the recording of the BBC's 'Songs of Praise' to an ecumenical pilgrimage to Lough Derg. In general there is a good working relationship between the churches throughout the dioceses. Indeed it is probably true to say, as one of the reports from a Northern diocese put it 'that there are never as many ecumenical initiatives underway at parish level as at present.' There has been increased ecumenical exploration and studies in the theological colleges as well as in the Biblical and Theological Associations.

On the world stage too, it is possible to point to positive news. The 'Harvest Project' launched by Cardinal Kasper to assess where the official dialogues have got to is evidence of just how much has actually gone on and is going at that level.² The issue of the reception of this official ecumenical dialogue is being pursued both by the joint working group between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches and by many scholars.³ The Global Christian Forum is another new initiative that aims to extend the ecumenical network by moving beyond the more classic structures of councils etc. It is an approach that better accommodates Pentecostals and Evangelicals who hitherto generally have not been involved in ecumenical dialogue.⁴

On the basis of what is actually going on, it is right to adopt Cardinal Kasper's point that we aren't in an 'ecumenical winter' but rather a 'summer time'. His point is that in springtime we notice new life

2. See Walter Cardinal Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (London: Continuum, 2009).

3. See Paul Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*. Oxford University Press, 2008 and William G. Rusch, *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007)

4. John Rodano, "The Global Christian Forum: The Framework of an Ecumenical Breakthrough" in Brendan Leahy (ed.), *Inter-Church Relations: Developments and Perspectives* (Dublin: Veritas, 2008), 91-104, at 102-103.

bursting around us but in summer time while we notice that new life, less growth continues.

TOWARDS A NEW STAGE

It is true to say, however, that we have moved into a transition time. With the explosion of ecumenical enthusiasm and activities in the 1960s and 1970s people affirmed the Ecumenical Movement, in the words of William Temple, as 'the great new fact of our time'. From the 1980s onwards ecumenism simply didn't quite make the news headlines any more. In more recent times interreligious dialogue has begun to emerge as the 'in' thing.

It is significant that the theme of the plenary session in Rome mentioned at the beginning of this article was 'Towards a New Stage of Ecumenical Dialogue'. Pope Benedict spoke of the urgent need to revive ecumenical interest and give a fresh incisiveness to dialogue, facing such challenges as 'new anthropological and ethical understandings, the ecumenical education of new generations and the greater fragmentation of the ecumenical panorama'.

There is a sense everywhere that something more is needed. Paul Avis remarks that at the present time there is much heart-searching about the future of ecumenism and its search for visible unity. Indeed there is scepticism about the value of investing resources in ecumenical activity.⁵

Christopher Ruddy of the Catholic University of America, writing in a recent article in *America*, speaks of an 'unshakable perception of ecumenical malaise'. He lists, from a Catholic point of view, the problems of recent decades: the demographic decline and theological confusion of mainline Protestantism; the continuing fragmentation of the Anglican Communion over matters of sexuality, authority and ordained ministry; the tandem increase of fundamentalism and indifference. Ruddy refers especially to what the late Dominican ecumenist Jean-Marie Tillard described in one of his final publications as an erosion of the basis of *koinonia* by a fragmentation of faith in Christ.⁶ No doubt, commentators from other churches might express this list differently. But we get the general drift.

5. See his preface to Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology* op.cit..

6. *America*, Nov. 8, 2010.

ANOTHER ROUTE?

The objective difficulties that exist in ecumenism could discourage. And yet perhaps the current situation is an invitation to consider pursuing another route to reach the goal. The fact is that we can't delude ourselves into thinking that we can reach unity by our own schemes, with our own measurements and in the timeframes we establish.

Ultimately, unity is a free gift of God. Of course, we have to do all our part to be able to recognise and welcome it when the moment comes, but until then, our part in the venture is to give priority to opening ourselves as much as we can to the action of the Holy Spirit. And that means conversion of mind and heart not only through prayer but also through a continual discernment together of what the Risen Lord is saying to us. That requires time and patience.

I heard recently that at the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue in Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn commented: 'We must speak of what the Lord is doing in our churches. To perceive together what he really wants to show us: yes, that would be an event!'. It requires losing time with one another not just to organise together what the Lord is saying through each other's ecclesial experience. Ecumenism can't simply be a politics based on negotiating skills and compromise tactics. The 'something more' that is needed is a living out together of a spirituality of communion/fellowship as we journey in the presence of the Risen Christ who promises to be with those who gather in his name (Mt 18:20).

I always find inspiring in this regard the words of Pope John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43 (published exactly ten years ago):

Make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan.⁷

The reference to 'school' reminds us that the experience of communion or fellowship is not something we can take for granted as something we already know. Yes, we share in communion through baptism, the life of grace, the early creeds ... But it's as if we need to 'exercise' in this communion, to start from scratch, to rediscover how to learn together

7. On the significance of a spirituality of communion for ecumenism see Walter Cardinal Kasper, *Sacrament of Unity* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 73-78.

to build up that communion in our relationships at every level. Pope John Paul continued:

A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as 'those who are a part of me'. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me'.

The late leader of the Corrymeela community, David Stevens often repeated that building friendships is of key importance. His view was that there are still far too few friendships across religious divides.⁸ Anyone who has engaged in ecumenical relations over the years will acknowledge that above all it is personal friendships that have impacted on them most. Going through the cross of division together brings relationships onto another plane. I can think here of my last meeting with David Stevens just days before his death last summer. Though terminally ill, he and his wife Mathilde warmly welcomed me into their home. Our conversation was full of an Easter joy while all the time recognising and praying together in recognition of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken who is the ecumenical 'star' guiding us to the destination that God alone knows best.

CHRIST EXISTING AS COMMUNITY

The focus on the presence of Jesus Christ among us is important. Jean-Marie Tillard's remark about a fragmentation in faith in Christ as a danger for ecumenism underlines the centrality of this presence. At

8. See the account of Ken Newell and Gerry Reynolds' ecumenical friendship in Ronald A. Wells, *Friendship Towards Peace* (Dublin: Columba, 2005).

a recent ecumenical meeting, a senior member of one of the churches reminded us not to forget the word 'ecumenism'. Often, he said, we speak of 'inter-church relations' but that's not quite the same thing. True. The word 'ecumenism' (*oikoumene*) contains the word 'home' (*oik-*) and perhaps this is a point we need to underscore. We need to build up a 'home' together in what Bonhoeffer called the 'Christ who is present'. Over and beyond the official levels of dialogue that are so necessary, a basic step is to create, through mutual love and living out the Word, living cells of the mystical body of Christ so that our relationships become a lived experience of the Church which, again in Bonhoeffer's words, is Christ existing as community.

One instance of this is a project entitled "Together for...". It's an initiative that has seen movements and communities all over Europe meeting up with one another simply to build up a spiritual network that can speak to the society of our time. Commenting on it, Cardinal Kasper has said:

I have always dreamt of a network without limits. My dream is that the communities will work together. What we need is a new Pentecost in which, just as happened in the first Pentecost, some women and men with Mary met together in the Upper Room and prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit. We cannot 'make' the unity of the Church. We cannot 'organise' it. But we must pray that it will come about.⁹

Spiritual ecumenism that is at the heart of this time of transitions comes about through the mutual love lived and shared in a myriad of situations, social, political, cultural. Nothing can prevent love. The 'Together for' project isn't all about big things. It is made up of simple deeds. Last summer for instance, various members of movements, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, met up in Corrymeela Centre for a week-end workshop together to get to know each other's community better. It was a time of prayer, working together and sharing. It was sealed by a pact of mutual love, to be united so as to bear witness to Jesus in the world.

9. See the proceedings magazine published on the occasion, "Together for Europe" (Rome, 2004), 30-31.

GUIDED BY THE SPIRIT

We are in the hands of the Holy Spirit. The Ecumenical Movement is the work of the third divine Person. If we are moving into a new stage in the Ecumenical Movement, it's a time firstly to begin again to ask the Spirit to guide us in this venture. But there is also a duty on us to be particularly attentive to what the Spirit might suggest to each person, community, parish or movement. Next year's Eucharistic Congress provides us with a specific opportunity as in its recent format the Congress provides ample scope for ecumenical initiatives. But, above all, the new stage we are entering requires we take the time to build up as much as we can living cells of Jesus Christ's body. And so to perceive together what he really wants to show us in the new stage in ecumenism also in Ireland.

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