

MY ECUMENICAL JOURNEY

By Canon John O'Toole

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all be one, we pray to You for the unity of Christians, according to Your will, according to Your means. May your Spirit enable us to experience the suffering caused by division, to see our sin, and to hope beyond all hope. Amen.

This prayer is used by the *Chemin Neuf* community which is Roman Catholic in origin but has an ecumenical membership and a charism of praying for the full unity of all Christians.

Introduction

I would like to speak about my own ecumenical journey and what, looking back, I see to have been the significant steps and milestones on the way. I'd like to approach this by reflecting on how my own personal experiences have overlapped with the Roman Catholic Church's ecumenical journey at the national and international levels and how the personal and the institutional may throw light on each other. Hopefully this will ring some bells with your own personal ecumenical journey.

My first observation is, however, that real life doesn't run as smoothly or as evenly as these straight lines. The "cardiograph screen" may be closer to reality for most of us – with many ups and downs as well as flat and even periods. Fortunately, our faith is that God is able to write straight with crooked lines. But I hope the following dates may be useful pegs on which to hang a few thoughts and reflections.

1950 I was born in Dublin on February 1st 1950 (my birth certificate has January 1st!). This was in the reign of Pope Pius XII. I lived there until I was eight years old, growing up in an environment where 99 per cent of people were RCs and where one's Catholic faith was enormously bolstered by the social and cultural support network. One never thought of not going to Mass!

My mum told me later that there were two Protestant families who lived along our road – the Stewarts and the Proctors. When the youngest Stewart boy was killed by a milk van the family brought the boy's favourite teddy to our house and gave it to my mum for my younger brother Gabriel. Simple gestures like this may advance ecumenism as much as, if not more than, all the agreed theological statements.

1958 My dad lost his job as a bus conductor and moved to Chatham in Kent to look for work. A few months later my mum and five kids arrived to join him. Suddenly reality changed for me. From being in the Catholic *majority* I was now part of a Catholic *minority*. There was no place available in the local Catholic primary school

and so I went to the local state school – where RCs stood outside the hall while prayers were being said and I had to pretend not to like the hymns that attracted me.

Some years later Mervyn Stockwood, the colourful Anglican Bishop of Southwark told me that in 1958 he had invited Bishop Cyril Cowderoy, his RC counterpart, for dinner. Showing him round his house he took him into the chapel and suggested that they said the Lord's Prayer together but Bishop Cyril replied: "No, I'm sorry. Rome won't allow it." Strangely this was the same year that saw the surprising election of Pope John XXIII who very quickly set up the Secretariat for Christian Unity.

In 1960 he extended an invitation to Dr Geoffrey Fisher, who thereby became the first Archbishop of Canterbury since the Reformation to visit the Pope, although in a private capacity. Most famously, John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council and we have perhaps forgotten, amid the focus on our internal changes, that one of its principal aims was to seek the reunion of all Christians.

1965 I went to the Junior Seminary at Mark Cross, near Tunbridge Wells at the age of 13 in 1963. Two years later, in 1965, I was expelled for smoking! 1965 marked also the close of the Second Vatican Council which brought about what we would call today a paradigm shift in the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of itself and its relationship to other Christians, other faiths and to the wider world. The Church moved from seeing itself as apart from or even against the world to being *in* the world and *for* the world, while not *of* the world.

The Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated on November 21st 1964 and spoke (in para 4) of the unique Church of Christ as "*subsisting*" in the Roman Catholic Church, but with many elements of sanctification and truth existing beyond its visible boundaries – so the Church of Christ is, as it were "defined" in the Catholic Church, but not "confined" to it. Importantly, the Decree recognises the presence of the Holy Spirit not only in other Christian believers as individuals, but in their communities – viewed not as heretical conventicles, but as sources of grace and holiness.

The Decree rightly sees the Church and the Church's unity not only in sociological terms (being chums together), but in theological terms – as mirroring the life of God as Father, Son and Spirit. We are "one in Christ" and so "brothers and sisters" and it is God's Spirit that draws and gathers us together as parts of one (albeit dysfunctional?) family. Perhaps a key quotation is in para 7: "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart (i.e. a conversion)". Change and conversion can be painful and many have had to make a painful and slow journey through the six C's – from conflict and competition, through coexistence and co-operation to commitment and eventually full communion. Over 50 years since the ending of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 it has also been said that Catholics can be divided into three groups: pre-Council, post-Council and what Council?

Having moved to a non-Catholic school for my A levels I discovered when I tried to join the Christian Union that the staff had to have a meeting to decide whether or not Catholics could be admitted. I made friends with Paul Hatt, a devout Anglican evangelical. He, his family and his church taught me much about the importance of reading, praying and living the Scriptures. Paul kept a Gideon's New Testament and Psalms in his blazer pocket and during the lunch hour would slip away quietly to a corner and spend ten minutes or so reading and reflecting on God's Word – and his example spurred me to a love of the Scriptures. His mum was a kind and saintly woman and I was delighted when she told me that I was on her prayer list.

I recall arriving at King's College, London as a 19-year-old to study history and clutching my supply of Catholic Truth Society pamphlets. I was ready to defend the RC corner even to the extent of defending the indefensible such as the Inquisition – but I was rather thrown into confusion to find the Anglican ordinands walking round in cassocks, holding thuribles and clutching Vatican II documents in their hands. I began to see that many differences are *within* rather than *between* denominations.

I remember also being surprised to find that Martin Luther had believed passionately in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist even though he rejected the idea of transubstantiation and the Mass as a sacrifice. As we prepare to commemorate in 2017 the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation I recall that while I was at the seminary at Womersley we were once set an essay by the very traditional Church history professor with the title: "If Martin Luther were alive today, he would have been at the Second Vatican Council. Discuss."

1978 Ordained in the year of the three Popes (Paul VI, another passionate ecumenist, John Paul I and JP II) and in my first appointment as an ordained priest, I was pleasantly surprised to find a good ministers' fraternal where there was respect for each other and for each other's tradition as well as a good lunch and the challenge of discovering different ways both of believing and of expressing belief. It was also obvious that many positions that people took were as much to do with personality and psychology as with philosophy and theology – and could cut across denominational lines.

The 1990s I had always been keen on ecumenism "in my head" but I think my experience at Thamesmead taught me how to be ecumenical "in my heart" too. St Paul's was a modern church building also opened in 1978 and shared by four denominations – Anglican, Methodist, URC and Roman Catholic. I went there in 1990. There were two chapels (a RC chapel and a United Congregation chapel) separated by a corridor which was known by the parishioners as Reformation corridor – a wooden construction that could be dismantled once unity had arrived! In the rest of the building not only did space have to be shared (a real difficulty) but the

collections were also shared (a real test of ecumenical commitment and literally putting your money where your mouth is).

Every Friday morning there was a Team meeting where we prayed, planned and argued together. Falling out and making up formed part of life: offering forgiveness and seeking forgiveness are key parts of both our denominational and ecumenical lives. Once a month there was a celebration of “Simultaneous Eucharists” when both congregations joined together, with two altars on the sanctuary and the lectern standing in between. The Liturgy of the Word was completely shared (with the homily being given by one of the Team), then we moved to our respective altar, but used the same Eucharistic prayer, praying for the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as for our own diocesan bishops and Church leaders.

People then came forward to receive communion from their own minister (so no intercommunion) and the service ended with the sign of peace followed by refreshments afterwards. It was a bold ecumenical experiment in its day and as far as we could go within the rules at that time within each other’s traditions. Certainly many friendships were made both by ministers and people that cut across denominations and theologies. It was during my time at Thamesmead that the 1993 document *Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* came out drawing together much good practice since Vatican II and spelling out the implications and possibilities that flow from the “real yet imperfect” communion that we already enjoy as Christians.

John Paul II’s famous encyclical *Ut Unum Sint (That they may be One)* came out in 1995 and I remember being greatly encouraged by its “easy to read” style and by the way it reaffirmed ecumenism as one of the pastoral priorities both of John Paul’s pontificate and of the Church’s mission (to be Roman Catholic is to be ecumenical). He also invited other Christian leaders and their theologians to explore with him how the Pope might exercise a service of love and be a focus of unity rather than a source of division among all Christians. Significantly, he asked forgiveness for the times the Pope’s authority has been used to dominate rather than to serve. The abuse of authority is something which can happen in all our traditions and at every level of the Church’s life – whether in the Vatican, in a diocese, in a parish, in a home.

From 1996 to 1999 I worked as part of the Team at the Catholic Missionary Society, leading parish and school missions throughout England, and this taught me not to advertise things as “ecumenical” (they attract few people), but to present a theme (e.g. family life or justice and peace) ecumenically. It’s the wisdom of “doing things ecumenically” rather than “doing ecumenical things”. One of the key stumbling blocks, that of celebrating the Eucharist and receiving communion together, was addressed in the RC Bishops’ teaching document *One Bread One Body* in 1998. The fundamental principle which underlines its norms on Eucharistic sharing is that “the Eucharist is properly the sacrament of those who are in full communion with the Church” and so cannot as a rule be received by those who are not in full

communion, except where there is “a danger of death, or if there is some other grave and pressing need such as a unique occasion for joy or for sorrow in the life of a family or individual such as a Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, Marriage, Ordination or death” (paras 106 and 109).

The teaching of *One Bread One Body* seems logical if one’s premise is that the Eucharist is a *sign* of unity, but some argue strongly that it is also a *means* to unity. We also live in a culture which often reacts emotionally rather than logically and so finds it difficult to make sense of the Church’s rules and the nuanced theological thinking on which they are based. People tend to say “What would Jesus do?” and quoting from the rule-book may cut little ice as a response. At the very least, therefore, a more generous interpretation of the permitted norms – and a wider knowledge of them – would be a help. John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* says: “*We can now ask how much further we must travel until that blessed day when full unity in faith will be attained and we can celebrate together in peace the Holy Eucharist of the Lord.*” (para77)

Returning to the diocese in 1999 I was appointed as parish priest to the large and lively parish of St Andrew’s, Thornton Heath. However, I was surprised how relatively little was done ecumenically. This was not due to a lack of goodwill but simply to a lack of time. The clergy were good people, but everyone seemed very busy doing their own thing in their own patch. With the tragedy of a sword attack in our Church the Salvation Army came to our rescue, changed the time of their own evening service and offered the Salvation Army citadel for our Sunday evening Mass with the Salvation Army captain rummaging around in his cupboards to try and find a candle for the RC congregation! That is practical ecumenism.

2005 In 2001, I became a member of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Committee (or English ARC as it is known) which is the national version of ARCIC – set up over 50 years ago now to study the ARCIC Agreed Statements and to see how best to make them more widely known at the local level. Pope Benedict XVI was elected Pope in 2005 and continued Pope John Paul’s urgent call to pray and work for unity insisting that this is not an optional extra but that “to be Roman Catholic is to be ecumenical.”

Travelling down to Guildford one day to have a pub lunch with some classmates of mine from our seminary days my eye was caught by a poster in St Nicholas’s Anglican church in Guildford advertising a talk for the coming week. The title of the talk was “Could the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church ever be united?” to be given by the then Bishop of Guildford, Bishop Christopher Hill.

I went back the following week to hear his excellent talk. I wonder, for example, which season of the year you think might best sum up the current state of ecumenism – would it be winter, spring, summer or autumn? Is the ecumenical glass half-empty or half-full – or has it been it been dropped and smashed? In 2009 Pope

Benedict XVI set up the Ordinariate to enable “groups of Anglicans” to join the Catholic Church while preserving elements of their theological, spiritual, pastoral and liturgical patrimony. He spoke of this as a “prophetic” gesture while others are more cautious and others more critical. Perhaps it is still too soon to tell. How might the Ordinariate be a “bridge” rather than a “wall” to full Christian unity?

2011 In 2011 I was appointed as Dean of St George’s Cathedral where I was very pleased to find that very strong friendships and links existed with our sister Anglican Southwark Cathedral. Every year we united for a joint pilgrimage and this touched and attracted a much wider group of people than a talk or a formal meeting. I was a little surprised when the young Anglican priest with us asked me if it was all right if he used the luminous mysteries of the Rosary for the prayer time which, according to our programme, was to be led by the Anglicans. Having two Southwark Cathedrals caused not a little confusion and quite a bit of fun at times and the emphasis in both was on worship, welcome and witness. WWW (and in that order) is a good brief mission statement for the cathedrals, churches and chapels of all our denominations.

2016 Pope Francis was elected in March 2013 and, from the start, showed his ecumenical commitment by deliberately choosing to describe himself as “the Bishop of Rome” rather than Supreme Pontiff. In January 2015 I started my present work as National Ecumenical Officer for the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales although my work also involves dialogue with people of other faiths and indeed of no faith.

The “bread and butter” of my work is servicing the various ecumenical bilateral dialogues between the Catholic Church and the Anglican, the Methodist, the United Reformed, the Byzantine Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches as well as informal conversations with the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches. There is also a Court of the Gentiles for dialogue with people of no faith. The “jam” on the bread is the privilege of representing the Catholic Church at many ecumenical services and events as well as attending the Church of England General Synod and, this year, the Methodist Conference.

So what answer would I give to the question: “Could the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church *ever* be united?” My answer is in terms of an image. If you travel not to Guildford, but to Liverpool, you will find two Cathedrals which are fairly close to each other. The Anglican Cathedral was designed by a Roman Catholic and the RC Cathedral was designed by an Anglican and the two cathedrals are joined together by a road which is called Hope Street. So my answer is hopefully yes – for where there is a will, there is a way – no matter how great or insuperable the difficulties or obstacles may seem.

Pope Francis has a rich ecumenical experience from his time in Buenos Aires where pastorally he emphasised relationships rather than structures and partnerships rather than rivalries. Relationships and trust are the bridge to reconciliation and unity or as one Anglican bishop has put it “*affective ecumenism comes before effective ecumenism*”. Pope Francis himself has famously said that “ecumenism is too important to be left just to the theologians.”

Significantly, his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) in November 2013 was addressed not just to Roman Catholics but to all Christians and was warmly welcomed across the traditions. *Laudato Si* was addressed to the whole of humanity and his latest Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) on the theme of marriage and family life speaks of the importance of love in the *Christian* family of the Church and in the family of the world.

What the fullness of unity will look like in reality we may not be able to imagine. Recently Pope Francis (in an address to the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity on 10 November 2016) spoke of how crucial it is for all of us to focus on the person of Christ since by drawing closer to him we will draw closer to one another. He also listed three “false models” of communion:

- Unity is not the fruit of our human efforts or the product constructed by ecclesiastical diplomacy, but is instead “a gift that comes from on high”. Unity is a journey rather than a destination.
- Unity is not uniformity. The different theological, liturgical, spiritual and canonical traditions which have developed in the Christian world are a wealth for and not a threat to the unity of the Church.
- Unity is not absorption. Christian unity does not lead to a “reverse ecumenism” for which churches would have to deny their own history of faith. By focusing on what we have in common rather than what separates us we are able to acknowledge that we are brothers and sisters.

Finally, I have brought a map to remind me of Blessed John Henry Newman’s great hymn, *Lead kindly light* and especially the lines: “*I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step enough for me.*” For Newman, faith is a lamp which lights up only the next step but, if we take that step in faith, then we have enough light to take the next step. We may not be able to see what full visible unity will eventually look like but we can take a step forward in faith – and leave the rest to God.

This talk was delivered to the Hertfordshire Circle on November 27th. Canon O’Toole is National Ecumenical Officer for the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.