

# A short history of Catholic ecumenism

Last summer the Newman Association endowed a one-year research fellowship in Ecumenical Theology and Ecclesiology at Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion. This was a practical demonstration of the Newman Council's support for what has become known as Receptive Ecumenism, a movement which has for some years been promoted by Professor Paul Murray and others at Durham and elsewhere. There is much token support for church unity amongst Christians, but actual progress has been very slow. Churches are unreceptive and there is a search for a new way forward.

In the period when St Paul was marshalling the scattered groups of early Christians he wrote to the Ephesians: "Do all you can to preserve the unity of the spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one body, one spirit, just as you were all called into the one and same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

The history of Christianity over the subsequent 2,000 years has, however, been characterised by divisions. The two most important were the schism between the eastern and western churches in 1054 and the splintering of the Roman Catholic church in Europe into many factions during the 16th century and thereafter.

When people have strong faiths they do not easily compromise. Religious conviction is not a matter for negotiation. After the Reformation Christian sects often defended themselves through persecution and violence. People with slightly different beliefs could be described as dangerous "heretics" and burnt at the stake, especially when religion became entangled with nationalism and politics, as it often did. Although hostility moderated over time the Roman Catholic Church continued to be strongly antagonistic to Protestant churches until the early part of the 20th century.

Many Newman Association members are old enough to recall the days when even to enter a non-Catholic church was said to risk sin. In the 1917 Code of Canon Law canon 1258 said: "It is unlawful for the faithful to assist in any active manner, or to take part in the sacred services of non-Catholics". Even at marriages and funerals passive presence would only be tolerated "for a grave reason".

It was left entirely to Protestants to set up the World Council of Churches in 1948. Even in Rome, however, attitudes were shifting. The Second Vatican Council formalised a profound change of approach. Indeed, Pope John XXIII initially linked the calling of the Council specifically with a search for Christian unity. Then in 1964 his successor Pope Paul VI promulgated the Council's decree on ecumenism called *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

The Council called on all the Catholic faithful to take an active part in the work of ecumenism. There could, the Decree said, be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. But how could the guardians of the "One True Faith" possibly enter into receptive dialogues with other religions? Well, it appeared that the Roman Church could at least admit to having made small mistakes. According to the Decree: "Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline, or even in the way that Church teaching has been formulated – to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself – these can and should be set right at the opportune moment."

In 1966 the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was created as a permanent dicastery of the Holy See and in 1988 this was upgraded by Pope John Paul II into a

Pontifical Council. In 2001 Cardinal Walter Kasper was appointed President of the Council, a post he held until 2010 when he was succeeded by Cardinal Kurt Koch.



In 2004 a 40th anniversary conference on *Unitate Redintegratio* was held and an update on the document was delivered by Cardinal Kasper. He said there had been dangers, which the Council had been aware of, in trying to incorporate the ecumenical movement within the Roman Church: it could bring tensions between traditionalist and progressive groups. The Catholic principles of ecumenism, he said, did not throw overboard anything which had been valued and cherished by the Church in its previous history. But the tradition was a living tradition. "The ecumenical movement does not annul tradition, rather it grants a new and more profound insight into what has been handed down once and for all."

Cardinal Walter Kasper

In the same talk he commented on the lengthy controversy raised over the Vatican Council's puzzling use of the phrase '*subsists in*' in describing the position of the Roman Catholic Church in relation to the Church of Christ. Previously the word '*est*' had been used in describing an identity of the Church of Christ Jesus and the Roman Church; they were one and the same, as Pope Pius XII had emphasised in *Humani Generis* in 1950. Did the phrase "subsists in" used in the document *Lumen Gentium* imply that other churches could claim validity? No, said Cardinal Kasper, but the Catholic Church now saw itself "in the context of dialogue with the other churches and ecclesiastical communities".

Today the Council is engaged in intermittent dialogue with a dozen or so Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Communions and with some Pentecostal groups. It also, somewhat anomalously, has responsibility for religious relations with the Jews; relations with the Muslims, however, are the responsibility of the separate Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Despite all the talking real progress has been painfully slow. Diversity is often a much stronger practical theme in religion than unity. In some parts of the world, such as Africa and Latin America, Pentecostals pose much more of a challenge to the Roman Catholic Church in attracting members than do the often declining Protestant sects such as Anglicanism and Methodism. The Pentecostals offer exciting and varied musical services and personal freedoms in contrast with Catholicism's rigid liturgies and obsession with sin. Rome has been in discussions with various Pentecostal groups since 1972 but what has been achieved?

The latest report on these discussions, in 2006, described frankly the Pentecostals' reluctance. "Pentecostals are cautious in regard to ecumenism. Although they recognise the work of the Spirit in other Christian traditions, and enter into fellowship with them, they are hesitant to embrace these movements wholeheartedly for fear of losing their own ecclesial identity or compromising their traditional positions". That must sum up the position of many, if not all, faiths.

Ecumenical discussions focus partly on doctrinal issues. The schism of 1054 related

partly to differences between Rome and Constantinople on the nature of the Trinity, in particular of the Holy Spirit. Today the Western and Eastern Orthodox Churches remain as far apart as ever on such dogmas. But there are also practical and disciplinary issues. Rome no longer insists on the exclusive use of Latin in services, and it is even willing to give ground in some circumstances on the marriage of priests. It is not unknown for Catholic parishes in the UK to hold their services regularly in Anglican churches. The Vatican will not, however, even discuss the possibility of women priests. Rapid changes in the Anglican Communion, including acceptance of homosexuals, have threatened relations not only with Rome but with other Protestant churches.

The 1964 Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* had made a particular mention of the Anglican Communion as occupying “a special place”. But by 2009 Pope Benedict XVI had become tired of endless talks with the Anglicans, with whom doctrinal differences were small but disciplinary differences were wide and growing rapidly wider. Instead, through the Apostolic Constitution *Coetibus Anglicanorum*, he offered individual Anglicans, including married priests, their own corner within the Roman Church called the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham; the Book of Common Prayer would be largely accepted but there would definitely be no women priests, let alone bishops.

Rome would accept other kinds of Christians, it seemed, only if they could be securely ringfenced. Contamination of the Magisterium of Rome had to be avoided. Ecumenism in practice for Rome was therefore much more of a monologue than a dialogue. But some Catholic activists in North-East England had been searching for a more positive approach. They were associated with organisations including the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University (also the home of the Centre for Catholic Studies) and Ushaw College. In January 2006 they held an international research colloquium on the theme Catholic Learning and Receptive Ecumenism. It was also the occasion for the award of an honorary doctorate of divinity to Cardinal Kasper.

The project focused on the fundamental need for two-way thinking. The point of ecumenism was not to ask “what do the other traditions first need to learn from us?” but rather “what do we need to learn from *them*?” That was why the theme of Catholic learning was heavily emphasised. A programme of development was carried out, mainly in North East England. In 2009 Cardinal Kasper expressed a cautious welcome: receptive ecumenism, he said, offered “a new way forward on our ecumenical path”.

In October 2013 Paul Murray, Professor of Systematic Theology at Durham University and Director of Durham’s Centre for Catholic Studies, gave a talk to the York Circle of the Newman Association. The challenge, he said, was to overcome an apparent impasse. “As pioneered through a series of projects operating out of Durham University’s Department of Theology and Religion in recent years,” he went on, “Receptive Ecumenism proceeds by bringing to the fore the dispositions of self-critical hospitality, humble learning and ongoing conversion that have always been quietly essential to good ecumenical work.” These principles should be turned into the explicit required strategy and core task of contemporary ecumenism.

Progress was indeed possible “but only if a fundamental, counter-instinctual move is made away from traditions wishing that others could be more like themselves to instead each asking what they can and must learn, with dynamic integrity, from their respective others”.

Professor Murray emphasised that “Life and Works” ecumenism – doing things

together – whilst absolutely vital could never be enough. We had to return to our core calling and ask what fresh performances of this were appropriate to the specific challenges and opportunities of our times. Testing by the ‘head’ – by critical theological scrutiny – must be supplemented by an affair of the ‘heart’ as a matter of being attracted by another tradition.

**Barry Riley**

## The Newman Association Fellowship at Durham

You will have heard and read by now that Council decided to make a substantial contribution to a Newman Association Fellowship in Receptive Ecumenism (RE), earlier in the year. At a recent Council meeting, as the prime mover in this award, I was asked to offer the Association at large some of the background detail as to how this will, I hope, benefit the Association, both in the near and the remote future.

Barry Riley has written up some of the ideas contained in the notion of Receptive Ecumenism and I do not intend to duplicate them here. I would, however, like to emphasise that this method of ecumenical engagement appears to be one of the most positive ways forward at a time when the ecumenical movement at large seems to have stalled somewhat on the theological level owing to various practical decisions made in some of the Churches with regard to sacramental discipline. So I think it is good for the Association to be on hand and engaged in promoting this particular form of ecumenism.

Moving on to more specific gains for the Association, it has been decided to offer an extra one-off talk on the present state of RE by Josh Furnal, who was awarded this Fellowship. It would obviously be impossible for him to go round all the Circles individually, so it is suggested that Circles within reasonable distances from each other should come together to mutually-agreed venues. If possible, the various dates and venues for these talks might be co-ordinated, at least in some way, so that Josh could go on a mini-tour – for example, of the Southern Circles. The Circles would jointly cover the travel expenses and Newman members could offer Josh overnight hospitality. His fee would be covered within the award. In this way, hopefully, all

Circles of the Association would be given the opportunity of being drawn into this movement without there being too much of a financial burden.

Josh’s talks would take place in the first half of the year before a conference on RE to take place in Fairfield University, Connecticut, in June. We are in the process of planning our own conference in Manchester in the early part of September entitled ‘The Fruits of Fairfield’. Josh will be the keynote speaker at that conference and will contribute all the most up-to-date information. It is intended that a document should be prepared after the Fairfield conference to be presented to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome. Paul Murray, Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies in Durham (CCS), which is co-sponsor of the Fairfield Conference, is also a



*Professor Paul Murray*

member of ARCIC III. This will mean that, through the Fellowship, the Association is not only drawn decisively into the wider academic world in the UK via its close association with the CCS, but also in the Catholic world.

Josh has to return to the USA at the end of September, but the connections built up through this Fellowship between the Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS) in Durham and the Association will continue and, hopefully, bear more fruit in the longer term. The CCS is working on a handbook on RE for the United Reform Churches in the Durham area and there is the possibility of using the Association's network throughout the UK to promote such a handbook much further afield.

I have also spoken to the Durham University Catholic Chaplain about making some moves towards bringing the Association into the mind of Catholic students with the possibility of recruiting that particular group of Catholics, as was done by the Association in the past. Josh and the CCS would be an ideal point to begin investigating such a possibility. Finally, on a wider and perhaps deeper level, as Paul Murray has mentioned to me, our support for the CCS through this Fellowship had created a Newman Association shape with the CCS. How we fill and develop this space will be one of our responsibilities for the future.

Such is the present state of the Fellowship and its relationship to the Association, and its future prospects. What is clear to me, as I informed Council, is that we, as an Association, are the only people who can make all this work:

- I can promote and answer queries
- Christopher Quirke and the Manchester Circle, in conjunction with the CCS, will be doing the main organisation of the September Conference
- but Josh's Circles 'tour' can only work if the Circles themselves support it.

What the Association has is an opportunity to join at a fundamental level in an aspect of the ecumenical movement which is growing in importance. If we take up this opportunity and challenge over the coming months, we will be showing that we are truly forward-looking in our thinking and this will bear much fruit, I am sure, in the years ahead.

**Brian Hamill**, *Vice-President of the Newman Association*

## Joshua Furnal

Dr Joshua Furnal is a member of the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University and was recently appointed as the Newman Association Research Fellow in Ecumenical Theology.

An American, Dr Furnal has taught at Durham in the areas of philosophy of religion, Christian theology and religion in films. A current project is the preparation of a monograph on the influence of Soren Kierkegaard upon Catholic theologians before the Second Vatican Council.

Other research interests have included 20th Century Catholic theology, ecumenism and Muslim-Christian dialogue. In 2012 he published an academic paper On the Hermeneutics of Religious Film Criticism. He is an Italian speaker and translates Italian theological papers.



*Joshua Furnal*