

The International Context of *Receptive Ecumenism*

by Joshua Furnal

A Report from Fairfield This roundup of the recent Third International *Receptive Ecumenism* Conference at Fairfield University is focused on some of the aims, praise, highlights, and challenges mentioned during the event. From June 9th–12th, 125 church leaders, theologians, and ecumenists from 22 countries, six different continents, and ten denominations gathered at Fairfield in Connecticut.¹



Joshua Furnal at Fairfield

In order to grasp the significance of this event, RE III, it is not sufficient merely to report the various statistics, but also to place this conference within a wider historical context. Ecumenism can be said to be receptive when churches are genuinely seeking to learn from each other. Back in 1966, Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey began a momentous journey toward unity on the heels of the Second Vatican Council—some may remember how Ramsey was moved to tears by Paul VI's gift of his episcopal ring to Ramsey. During that encounter between Rome and Canterbury, "the real but incomplete communion we share was rediscovered and affirmed"². It was also from this encounter that the notion of a "dialogue of truth and love" emerged—that is, a desire to give expression, through joint prayer, witness and service, to that which we hold in common, by discovering in the other a love for Christ which invites us into practical co-operation and service.

That journey toward unity was renewed and deepened in 2006, with the meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Rowan Williams. In a joint declaration, they said: "True ecumenism goes beyond theological dialogue; it touches our spiritual lives and our common witness"....and amid the "present serious obstacles" we renew "our commitment to pursue the path towards full visible communion in the truth and love of Christ". During that encounter they decided that, based upon the faith shared in common, both communions could confront many issues that are vexing the Church today—such as peace in the Holy Land, terrorism, respect for life, marriage and family, the eradication of poverty, oppression, and persecution and, finally, issues regarding consumerism, the environment and other religions.

Also in 2006 the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM) published a document entitled *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*—which emerged from a 2001 meeting in Canada between Anglican and Catholic Bishops. The task of this group was to reach theological agreement and to identify concrete steps forward toward unity. Based on the substantial agreement in matters of faith the Bishops called for a shared common mission in social justice and pastoral care—because "*Koinonia* with one another is entailed by our *koinonia* with God in Christ (cf. 1 John 1.1-4). This is the mystery of the Church". *Koinonia* is a Greek

word meaning communion.

In his response to this document the then Anglican Bishop Paul Richardson said that “those who despair of an ecumenical winter need to remember [that] Unity is something we are called to pursue but it is also God’s gift to his church. The Holy Spirit takes us by surprise”. In Bishop Richardson’s estimation, however, as yet “full communion cannot take place” because this document does not give any indication of resolving some core issues such as the validity of Anglican Orders.

Bishop Richardson also mentioned how “Anglicans are more prepared than Roman Catholics to allow decisions to be made at the local level and there is considerable reluctance to interfere with the autonomy of provinces”.³ In the end Bishop Richardson concluded: “There needs to be a period of what is termed ‘reception’ when ordinary Christians, as well as church leaders and theologians, ask whether they can recognize the ARCIC⁴ documents as expressions of the gospel and learn from them”.⁵

It is within this wider context that the first *Receptive Ecumenism* conference in Durham was held in 2006. RE I, organised by the Centre for Catholic Studies, brought together 150 theologians, ecumenists, and ecclesiastics of international standing from across various Christian traditions to explore a fresh way of conceiving the ecumenical task fitted for the contemporary situation. The project tested this strategy in relation to Catholicism (the host tradition).

It was experienced by all as a remarkable, graced *happening*. Senior theologians, ecumenists and ecclesiastics variously spoke of the event (and the fresh thinking it introduced) as “historic”, “groundbreaking”, “opening a new chapter in ecumenism”, and as “providing the much-needed model for future initiatives”. A major volume of essays came out of this project, entitled *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

A new strategy

In a recent issue of *The Ecumenist*⁶ Paul Murray introduced the new strategy of *Receptive Ecumenism* to a popular audience.⁷ In it Prof Murray, Director of Durham’s Centre for Catholic Studies, says that RE is a “simple but far-reaching strategy” that marks a shift away from churches asking what others need to learn from them, and a shift toward asking what they need to learn from the others. *Receptive Ecumenism* is “a call to conversion, to grow, to learn more about the Lord’s call to us, not just learning about the other, but from the other”.⁸ Theologically speaking, Professor Murray roots *Receptive Ecumenism* in Christian hope:

*Hope, unlike optimism, is not a form of reality denial that ignores the reality of apparent roadblocks in order to stay buoyant; on the contrary, hope takes reality seriously in all its problematic aspects and asks how the churches are resourced to live in the face of and through the roadblocks in question.*⁹

Murray calls for this renewed hope-filled form of ecumenical engagement, one not steeped in the



Paul Murray

denial of optimism or which dares not to speak of our real wounds and difficulties. Drawing upon an image from St Bonaventure¹⁰ Murray says that the fundamental strategy of *Receptive Ecumenism* is

to show our wounds to each other, knowing that we cannot heal or save ourselves; knowing that we need to be ministered to in our need from another's gift and grace; and trusting that as in the Risen Lord in whose ecclesial body these wounds exist, they can become sites of our redemption, jewels of transformed ecclesial existence.

Although some bilateral dialogues do continue today¹¹ *Receptive Ecumenism* offers a new strategy for those dialogues that have run out of steam. The goal of *Receptive Ecumenism* is not the undifferentiated uniformity of 'you-come-in-ism' but rather a deepening of each tradition's particularity which makes up the fullness of the catholicity of the people of God and moves us towards greater ecclesial flourishing in communion with the life of the Triune God.

It soon became apparent that there was a real need for a more practically-focused research project, involving the local churches of the north-east of England, that could provide a model for good practice for academic and ecclesial communities globally. This provided the impetus for a 2009 conference that began to address what mutual learning might take place to equip churches for mission, both independently and together. Where the primary focus in 2006 was on illustrating, testing, and refining the proposed strategy of *Receptive Ecumenism* in relation to Roman Catholicism, the second conference in 2009 complemented this by inviting representatives of an even broader range of ecclesial traditions.

The RE II event brought together 200 church leaders, theologians, ecumenists, ecclesial bureaucrats, social scientists, organisational experts, and local church practitioners to spend four days and nights together. This conference focused on developing RE as an ecumenical strategy across a broad range of Christian traditions to highlight its relevance at the level of local church life.

There followed the *Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church* research project, which used empirical observation and analysis. This provided a better picture of the organisational, structural, ministerial, and procedural realities of ordinary church practice across denominations in the North East of England and pointed the way towards structural and sacramental unity of the churches internationally. Along with the input from each denomination our researchers identified some strengths and weaknesses in each denomination and in each case we have made recommendations for that denomination so that each could find enrichment by drawing upon the ecumenical learning of the other available groups.

The Fairfield Agenda

The central conviction of *Receptive Ecumenism* is counterintuitive: we do not set up one example for all the other groups to imitate, but rather we ask each group to identify what kind of organisational enrichment should be sought and we investigate whether that can be provided by learning from the good practices of the other groups. In other words, it is a move away from consultancy and a move towards genuine conversation; this is what theologians call 'communion'.

This brings us up to the most recent *Receptive Ecumenism* conference in the USA.

Drawing upon the fruits of the first and second *Receptive Ecumenism* conferences, and the North East England Regional project, the third conference was entitled *Receptive Ecumenism in International Perspective: Ecclesial Learning in Context*. This event was jointly organised by the Centre for Catholic Studies at *Fairfield University* CT, USA and the Centre for Catholic Studies at *Durham University*, UK.

The gathering brought together a large number of church leaders, theologians, ecumenists, ecclesial administrators, and practitioners from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions. This international conference accomplished three things: i) it continued to explore the theory and practice of *Receptive Ecumenism*; ii) it drew together practitioners of *Receptive Ecumenism* from all over the globe to share their findings; iii) it invited others to engage the potential of *Receptive Ecumenism* for further initiatives.

At the Fairfield conference, many delegates reported on all the practical initiatives of *Receptive Ecumenism* currently underway in different contexts in the world today. The benefits that were mentioned regarding this new phase of ecumenism included: its theologically self-reflective method, the positive instances of grass-roots contextualisation in meeting local needs, and how *Receptive Ecumenism* derives organisational reform from and through another tradition globally. The Vatican official for the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, Father Tony Curren said that we were in the “middle miles of the marathon” of work toward full Christian unity, and he praised *Receptive Ecumenism* for providing a response to those disappointed in the pace of ecumenical progress. Building on what had been established would strengthen relations and deepen dialogue between the different Christian churches, planting new seeds of hope.

Challenging the Churches

In this way it was fitting that the ecumenical endeavour at the Fairfield conference took place near two large statues of St Ignatius of Loyola – one black, the other white – in front of the campus chapel. Both figures face each other intensely, depicting the *Examen* of conscience which lies at the heart of Jesuit spirituality and action. During the opening ceremony Bishop Frank Griswold drew upon this Ignatian heritage by challenging the churches to open their minds and examine their hearts, as they try to fathom God’s will and rediscover the unity of the broken Body of Christ. “Our job,” he said, “is not to create something new but to allow the Spirit to clear away the ecclesiastical idols that block our vision of unity, such that we will finally become what has not yet been revealed (1Jn 3.2).”¹²

In Cardinal Kurt Koch’s message to the conference he quoted John Henry Newman to make sense of why unity has not yet been achieved:

We dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and yet we keep it to ourselves, and we fear that as a cause of estrangement, which really would be a bond of union. We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly.

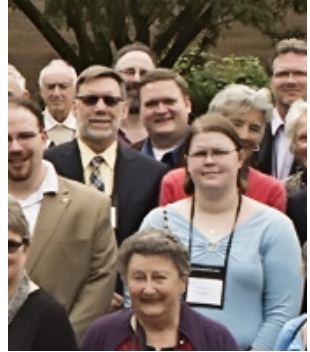
Cardinal Koch said that despite our impaired communions “Receptive Ecumenism is seeking to provide a road map for further progress” and reminded the conference how: *Receptive Ecumenism proposes that, in a dialogue of truth, we are honest about our weaknesses and allow them to become “a bond of union” ... But the dialogue that begins*

at the root of things, with the real challenges and woundedness of our ecclesial life, is one in which our relationships grow and deepen. It is truly a dialogue of love.¹³

Over and over again at the Fairfield conference both scholars and practitioners heralded the election of Pope Francis. For instance, in Archbishop Justin Welby's message to the conference he said that "although different churches are doing social mission together already, there are remarkable opportunities presently opening up and Receptive Ecumenism provides an additional way to take us forward". Welby also observed that:

The papacy of Pope Francis provides us with a time of grace-filled opportunity, where there is confidence, humility, spirit-filled spontaneity, and recognition of the strength of symbol and gesture for greater commitment to learn from each other's traditions and see the potential in the other in a way that can transform us as Church.

Many scholars and practitioners at the conference remarked that the election of Pope Francis had presented new opportunities for the Catholic Church to face its internal problems honestly, grow in fidelity to Christ and ask what ecumenical partners can teach it. For instance the Catholic Bishop of Saskatoon, Donald Boland, observed how, since the previous *Receptive Ecumenism* conferences, both Anglican and Catholics have received new leaders in Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby who have both incorporated the language of *Receptive Ecumenism* in their own writings.



Prof Catherine Clifford, from St. Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario, said that she saw "a quantum leap forward in Pope Francis's call for the evangelical renewal of ecclesial structures", including his specific mention to an Orthodox delegation in June 2013 regarding the extent to which Catholics can learn from the Orthodox Church about the collegiality of bishops and the collaborative work of synods.¹⁴

The influence of Pope Francis was not limited to Anglican or Orthodox remarks. For instance, Pope Francis's recent iPhone message to a conference of Pentecostal leaders, asking them to pray for him, aroused comment; one Pentecostal scholar, Dr Nestor Medina, said that it made "a sea change of difference to the way these people now perceive the Catholic Church". Dr Medina also said that "having the first Latin American Pope has made a huge impact with people who admit that they do pray for him in a way that would simply never have happened before".¹⁵

A road map for dialogue¹⁶

How can we overcome the fatigue (at the institutional level of official dialogue) and the ignorance (at the popular level) regarding how much Christians can actually do together at the same altar? Paul Murray says that *Receptive Ecumenism* points the way forward by providing "a new way of speaking about an old way of thinking" about creatively engaging in mission across denominational lines. Instead of focusing the dialogue upon the obstacles that prevent the other church from being in communion with your own, *Receptive Ecumenism* shifts the perspective to the plank in our own eye, which requires us to learn from the other.

Although *Receptive Ecumenism* was jumpstarted by academics at the Centre for

Catholic Studies in Durham University this conference at Fairfield University was described as 'a coming-of-age party' that saw the child leaving home on its own two legs. At the conference it became apparent that the 'virtuous virus' of *Receptive Ecumenism* was infecting places like Canada and Australia in several promising ways in terms of shared ministry and mission—reinforcing Archbishop Justin Welby's observation that "ecumenism is the oxygen of mission". For instance the Catholic Bishop of Saskatoon, Don Boland, said that in his experience *Receptive Ecumenism* has come along at an important point in the development of ecumenical discussions, providing a label to something already underway. Bishop Boland said that having the term allows us to identify and maintain the progress that has been achieved so far.

Prof Catherine Clifford reported how IARCCUM¹⁷ was able to produce common policy and make recommendations as a pastoral resource for complex issues like the ordination of women, the Ordinarate, roles at an ecumenical Eucharist, and the structure of interchurch marriage ceremonies. Ray and Fenella Temmerman, from the Canadian Association of Interchurch Families, presented themselves as an example of a Canadian interchurch family (Catholic-Anglican) which is a common phenomenon in society today. The Temmermans, like many contemporary couples, are a model of an important step in the movement toward Christian unity: they do not simply recognise their diversity but they love it despite the pain it sometimes can bring. They said that: *Churches need to work at their unity the way married couples have to work at theirs. It is important that our churches begin to recognize that it is not only what they have to offer each other that is important; their capacity to receive and love the other ... will also be the key element in calling both churches to become what God calls them to become.*¹⁸

The Temmermans inspired the conference to consider how couples like them are 'a sign and symbol of what our Churches strive to become'. In many cases, when couples from different churches marry, they end up choosing to belong to, and raise their children in, only one of the churches – or in no church at all. The Temmermans and other members of the Association of Interchurch Families remain active in their own communities, they attend the services of their spouses and they try to raise their children with openness to both. They await the day when their churches adopt a shared ministry paradigm because, in their own words, "it seems strange that a couple united in baptism and marriage should be separated at Communion".

Pastoral Needs

It was within such a context of pastoral need that the short paper panel on paradigms for Shared Ministry took place. In the first paper Rev David Tatem from the United Reformed Church spoke about his experience in the UK with Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) in which two communities become one congregation with a shared liturgy as an expression of local visible unity. In the second paper Rev Dr Sandra Beardsall discussed the development of Ecumenical Shared Ministry in the remote regions of Canada between Protestant and Catholic communities. The third presentation was by Rev Dr William McDonald, a Methodist from the USA. McDonald spoke about his preliminary research into the underexplored range of paradigms for shared ministry in the USA. McDonald has set up online discussion boards and has sent out surveys to track this phenomenon; his preliminary results seem very promising. Rev Richard Tutin from Australia gave the final presentation,

speaking of his experience in shared ministry in a rural setting and the ecumenical advances that had been made there.

In 2012 IARCCUM conducted a survey of the various national Anglican Roman Catholic dialogue groups, some of which have been established for thirty years or more.²⁰ Most have 5 or 6 members from each Church, chosen for a defined term, and selected for their ecumenical expertise. The experience has been patchy: for instance, in Belgium, the ARC group's activities are known only by the people who are interested in ecumenism. However, the group is about to start working on the theme of *Receptive Ecumenism*. In the USA the group has been working on an agreed statement regarding 'Ecclesiology and Moral Discernment' since 2008, and should produce this for their bishops by the end of this year.

In France such a group has been meeting since 1970. Recently they have been looking at the Daily Office as a shared gift of Anglican and Roman Catholic communities and they have prepared material for Daily Prayer to be used in ecumenical gatherings. But the survey highlighted the difficulty of promoting the reception of ARCIC and IARCCUM's official ecumenical work. On the one hand the group in Canada has taken up this task as one of its central concerns and has set up a YouTube project to make public the degree of faith that Anglicans and Catholics share in common. Meanwhile, however, the ARC group in Ireland has been meeting only since 2011: topics discussed have included baptism, priestly formation and training and the outworking of the Dublin (RC) Eucharistic Congress—although there is a growing interest in *Receptive Ecumenism*.

A separate perspective¹⁹ was offered by Fr Orobator, the provincial superior of the East Africa Jesuit province, who reported how Christians from Europe exported their divisions to Africa, sometimes dividing up territory among themselves or in agreements made with colonial powers or local leaders. Moreover the ecumenical scene has been made more complicated in Africa by the rapid rise of new home-grown and proudly independent varieties of Christianity. Fr Orobator explained that, while traditional African religions provided a conducive climate for the reception of the other faiths, the rapid growth of new Churches presents serious challenges for the ecumenical movement.

In Asia, too, where Christians are mostly in a minority, discussion of ecclesial reform is often eclipsed by the pressing need for practical cooperation in three areas: these are identified by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences as dialogue with the poor, with culture and with other religions.²¹ As for Latin America (and Latinos in North America), Peter Casarella reported how the church scene has become more fragmented with the growth of mostly independent Pentecostal communities—especially regarding any devotion to Mary. Reacting to this challenge Catholics have often disparagingly described these communities as new Protestant sects, with no attempt to understand their history, ecclesiology or liturgical practice.²²

Concluding remarks

I would now like to conclude with a note on some open questions raised at the conference regarding the future potential of *Receptive Ecumenism*.

- Although *Receptive Ecumenism* has renewed the desire for organisational reform and decision making, there is still much potential for *Receptive Ecumenism* to take up issues of doctrinal exchange and comparative theology in the future.

- Several people expressed the need to define the criteria and test the limits of *Receptive Ecumenism* as a method. This involves the need to discern criteria that help churches at the local level identify the good gift that needs to be received.
- There is a need for ecumenical education in theology programs across the globe. Ecumenical education is a key component for progress in any context where different churches are living, working and witnessing side-by-side. How can we hope to overcome the “scandal of division” when most priests, pastors and people in authority have little or no real experience of our shared Christian heritage during their most formative years?²³
- No matter how hard we try, we cannot orchestrate receptivity in our own or another tradition. The spirit-led, ecclesial act of recognising the charism in another baptised person requires “the revolution of tenderness” and the welcome of God.

During his recent address to Archbishop Welby, Pope Francis said that “We cannot claim that our division is anything less than a scandal and an obstacle to our proclaiming the Gospel of salvation to the world”. Pope Francis continued:

*The goal of full unity may seem distant indeed, but it remains the aim which should direct our every step along the way. I find a source of encouragement in the plea of the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism that we should advance in our relationship and cooperation by placing no obstacle to the ways of divine providence and by not prejudicing future promptings of the Holy Spirit (Unitatis Redintegratio, 24). Our progress towards full communion will not be the fruit of human actions alone, but a free gift of God. The Holy Spirit gives us the strength not to grow disheartened and he invites us to trust fully in the power of his works.*²⁴

Pope Francis is correct to remind us of the words of St Paul: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). The recent meeting between Pope Francis and Archbishop Welby highlighted for us the importance of becoming bread for each other on the journey towards full communion. Together they have established the Global Freedom Network to eliminate human trafficking and this goes to confirm Archbishop Welby’s statement that “ecumenism is the oxygen of mission”.

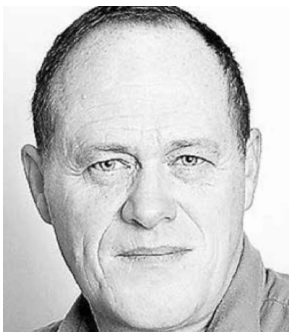
Receptive Ecumenism encourages us to move away from the prophet Elijah’s perspective of viewing the other’s altar as impaired as we await the fire of God on our own (1 Kgs 18). The claim of *Receptive Ecumenism* is that this way of viewing the other’s altar does not cement the people of God together, but rather wounds us instead. So by turning the tables round *Receptive Ecumenism* asks us to put ourselves in the shoes of Doubting Thomas, who was outside the room when the Lord appeared (Jn 20). *Receptive Ecumenism* places its emphasis upon the need to listen to the other and to see the wounds, and through them to encounter the Risen Christ in glory.

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- 1 Of the 125 that attended: 80 gave presentations, and 45 were either chairs or participants. Countries represented (where people work, not necessarily nationality): 33 US, 30 UK, 18 AUSTR, 11 CAN, 4 BEL, 4 IRE, 3 NZ, 3 GER, 2 SoA, 2 VAT, 2 KEN, 2 ITA, 2 JAPAN, and one each from FRA, GRE, ICE, INDO, LEB, MILAW, PAK, SWED, SWITZ. In general the various denominations present: Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, United Reformed Church, Uniting Church of Australia.
- 2 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-vi_spe_20061123_common-decl_en.html

- 3 Bishop Richardson's observations here cohere with points raised in sections 56-57 of the 1998 ARCIC II document entitled 'The Gift of Authority' <http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arciII_05.html>.
 - 4 The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission
 - 5 http://iarccum.org/archive/IARCCUM_2000-2010/2007_iarccum_richardson-paul.pdf
 - 6 A quarterly journal published by Novalis in Toronto, Canada.
 - 7 Paul D. Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism", in *The Ecumenist* 51:2 (2014) pp.1-7. For more, see <https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/projects/receptiveecumenism/publications/>
 - 8 <http://angelqueen.org/2014/06/11/learning-from-other-churches-ecumenists-find-hope-in-pope-francis/>
 - 9 Murray, p. 4.
 - 10 St. Bonaventure, 'On the Mystery of His Glorification' in *Tree of Life*. Special thanks to Rachael Davies for this reference.
 - 11 For instance, see Vassiliki Stathokosta (ed.), *Theological Studies and Ecumene: the participation of the Orthodox Church in Inter-Christian Dialogues and their Future* (Athens: Pedio, 2013). See also the latest document from the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches entitled, *Reception: A Key to Ecumenical Progress* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014).
 - 12 <http://www.news.va/en/news/healing-gifts-for-wounded-hands-receptive-ecumenism>
 - 13 <http://www.news.va/en/news/card-koch-sends-message-to-receptive-ecumenism-con>
 - 14 <http://angelqueen.org/2014/06/11/learning-from-other-churches-ecumenists-find-hope-in-pope-francis/>
 - 15 http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/06/12/receptive_ecumenism_in_a_latian_american_context/1101654
 - 16 <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/2564/road-map-for-dialogue>
 - 17 The International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission
 - 18 <http://catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1402397.htm>
 - 19 <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/briefs/cns/20140612.htm>
 - 20 <http://iarccum.org/national-arc-survey/>
 - 21 <http://www.news.va/en/news/receptive-ecumenism-conference-ends-with-signing-o>
 - 22 http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/06/12/receptive_ecumenism_in_a_latian_american_context/1101654
 - 23 <http://www.news.va/en/news/receptive-ecumenism-conference-ends-with-signing-o>
 - 24 <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2014/06/16/unity-is-distant-but-still-our-goal-pope-tells-anglican-leader/>
- The following links will provide more information. For videos of the Fairfield conference (requires iTunes) <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/itunes-u/center-for-catholic-studies/id876010720?mt=10>
 For Durham RE web pages <https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/projects/receptiveecumenism/>

Advance notice – for ticket information see the January 2015 issue



London Newman Lecture 2015 Thursday, March 12th **Neuroscience and the Soul**

This lecture is to be given by **Dr James Le Fanu** at Heythrop College, London. A GP, Dr Le Fanu is also a journalist and the author of books including '*Why Us? How Science Rediscovered the Mystery of Ourselves*'