

The Church and the churches

Tom Layden

THIS ISSUE OF *THE WAY SUPPLEMENT* FOCUSES on the ecclesial dimensions of Christian spirituality in the context of the contemporary interest in the renewal of both the idea and the practical reality of the Church. The Second Vatican Council makes clear that ecumenism is now one of the constitutive elements of church life. 'Promoting the restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the chief concerns of the Second Sacred Ecumenical Council of the Vatican.' Thus the opening words of the Council's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. Later on the document 'exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognise the signs of the times and to participate skilfully in the work of ecumenism'. (*UR 4*)

This line of teaching has been confirmed and developed in subsequent Church documents including the Ecumenical Directories of 1967/75 and 1993, John Paul II's *Ut unum sint* (1995) and his *Novo millennio ineunte* (2001). So much for the teaching as stated on paper, but how stands the situation in practice? Ecumenism may well be a constitutive element of church life in theory but is this the case in day to day church life? Do we follow the Lund principle of doing together everything except for that which conscience obliges us to do separately? Or is the daily lived ecclesial reality one in which each church does its own thing and pursues its own path of separate development with little, if any, reference to other Christian communities?

In most places a concerted effort is made in Church Unity Week to organize a service of joint worship and to ensure that the venue for it rotates from year to year. Special efforts are made in Lent with joint Bible study sessions and in some places a service to intercede for the grace of visible unity among the followers of the Lord Jesus takes place on the afternoon of Pentecost Sunday. But on a daily basis in ordinary time parish communities often act as if their neighbours from other parts of the Christian family did not exist.

The socio-political situation here in Northern Ireland throws up its own set of difficulties and challenges when it comes to inter-church contact and co-operation. The violence of the past thirty years (leading to more than 3000 deaths) has left its own legacy of fear and suspicion. Even though the cease-fires of recent years have opened up a window of hope for a new beginning, a residue of mistrust from the past still

lingers. As a result of the conflict, the community has become more and more segregated, with the majority of Catholics and Protestants living in separate neighbourhoods. Years of bombings and shootings, of acts of intimidation and discrimination, have generated a climate of suspicion of 'the other side'. A young man feels unsafe going to a cinema in a certain part of the town because it is in the perceived territory of the others and he feels vulnerable to attack there because of the experience of some of his friends in the recent past. A young woman as she prepares to move from one job to another informs her work colleagues of her marriage plans. When it transpires that she is about to marry someone from the other community she is asked why she could not have married one of 'her own sort'. A man whose brother was killed in a sectarian assassination in the 1970s finds it a struggle to feel at home with those of a different religious and political background. A woman whose family was burned out of their home twenty years ago hesitates to trust readily people from another tradition. Such experiences are relatively commonplace in some parts of Northern Ireland. This is a context in which ecumenical ministry is greatly needed but is also especially difficult because contact between Catholic and Protestant often carries the overlay of generations of socio-political tensions.

Keeping in mind

One very simple way of keeping our sisters and brothers from other communions in mind is remembering them specifically and by name in the public intercessory prayers of our church. Concretely that would mean praying for the General Synod of the Church of Ireland (Anglican) during the prayers of the faithful at Mass in May and doing likewise for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in June. Some years ago I remember attending a celebration of Holy Communion in an Anglican church in London where a special prayer was offered for Pope John Paul. The inclusion of such a petition bore witness to a level of ecumenical sensitivity which looked beyond the boundaries of its own parish and communion. If we believe in the old tag *lex orandi, lex credendi*, it is plain how, by remembering the concerns of other communions in our liturgical praying, we are testifying to our belief in the bonds of communion of varying degrees that mutually link us.

Last January, I accompanied a group of first year post-primary school students from an integrated (i.e. both Catholic and Protestant) school on a tour of churches in the East Belfast area. In each church we visited,

the minister/priest introduced the students to the style and emphasis of that particular tradition in the larger Christian family. This was followed by an opportunity to ask questions and then time to wander around the church building to study its architecture, furnishings etc. At the start of the walkabout one boy said to me that he would describe himself less as Catholic or Protestant and more as 'Dolly Mixtures' (a variety of mixed candies or sweets). The reason for this was that his parents were mixed and he would sometimes go to his mother's church and at other times to his father's.

He wondered how the churches would feel about someone like him. Would they feel more comfortable with someone whose parents belonged to the same church? Would I as a priest object to his going to his father's Protestant church on a Sunday? Would I ever go to such a church myself? Would I feel at home there? What a difference it would mean for him and for his parents if they were to hear prayers recited for the bestowal of God's blessing on the people in the 'other' church. It would convey a sense of recognition that between these communities there is a bond of communion in the Spirit uniting them as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. They are not rivals in competition with each other. While not in any way denying the reality of difference in tradition and divergence in theological understanding, the very fact of praying for the 'other' church would signify a conviction that what unites them is infinitely greater than what divides them. When the boy goes to the other church, there is no need for my church to feel that it is losing out. He is going to pray and worship with a community with whom we are deeply (if not fully) connected in our common faith in Christ. Whenever he comes to the church of which I am a member, the other church does not lose out here either. That which unites us with them, namely belief in the Lord's paschal mystery, the gift of the Spirit in the community, and reverence for the Word of God is greater than those areas in which our understanding and practice diverge.

What would convince this boy and his family more effectively of the growing unity between these parts of Christ's church than to see me, an ordained RC priest, coming to his father's church simply to be there as part of the congregation to join in the hearing of the Word and in the offering of prayer and supplication for the needs of all? And for the minister from his father's church to occasionally come to share in worship in the RC tradition in the measure allowed by conscience and church discipline? While the stated positions of the churches are quite ecumenical, the practice at ground level can be somewhat at variance

with this. Ecumenism can be seen as something for Unity Octave but as an optional extra for those so inclined for the rest of the year.

Inter-church marriages

The past two generations have seen a tremendous transformation in the manner in which the Christian churches relate one to another. The previous attitude of hostility or at best of distant icy politeness has been replaced with attitudes more profoundly respectful and more warmly cordial. The initial ecumenical enthusiasm of the 1960s has waned. Some even see this age as a rather 'wintry time' for ecumenical endeavours. The truth is that while there has been a vast improvement from what things used to be like in the 'bad old days', a certain awkwardness and uneasiness continue to characterize ecumenical relations in particular situations. Nowhere is this sometimes more apparent than in the area of the pastoral care of inter-church marriages.

While it is true to say that we have come a long way from the day of sacristy weddings in a distant city there is still a certain unevenness in the way in which couples entering an inter-church marriage (and their families) can experience the ministry of their respective churches. In some places the pastoral care is excellent and a spirit of collaboration and mutual respect marks the ministerial approach of the clergy and congregation from both churches. At times some couples encounter difficulties when they come across 'a winner takes all' kind of mentality on the part of certain clergy. Such a person wants everything 'done' in their own church and is none too anxious to facilitate the attendance or participation of clergy of the other tradition. In such a context it is sometimes said that it is better when 'the other side' do not practise their religion because then only one tradition has to be taken into account. This strikes one as a rather lazy attitude revealing a less than fully convinced ecumenical outlook.

Parity of esteem

In church life, we can learn from the political, social and cultural context in which we find ourselves. That context is going to determine the climate in which we exercise our discipleship and carry out ecclesial ministry. Living here in Northern Ireland, ecumenical ministry acquires its own resonance from the particular history we inherit and the ways in which our polity is currently undergoing change. This is a time of transition in which local politicians are assuming control of areas of government which have been controlled by London during the Troubles. The new style of government here, coming out of

the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday, 1998, puts particular emphasis on the concept of parity of esteem. This refers to the need to ensure that the two main political/cultural traditions enjoy the recognition of equality of status at all levels of government. There must be no appearance of domination or subordination.

Both traditions are to be esteemed. The winner does not take all. Everything is to be shared. This concept represents a huge challenge to all participants in public life and to society here in general. Here is something that the nascent civil society can bring to the churches in our practice of ecumenism. In all that we do ecumenically we are called to practice parity of esteem in our dealings with churches of various traditions. What might this mean concretely?

Baptism in an inter-church context

Through various contacts which I have here in Northern Ireland I am quite frequently invited to participate in the baptism ceremony for children of an inter-church marriage. In a marriage where both partners are practising their faith I will always indicate my strong desire that clergy of the two traditions be present and that participation be such that everyone will feel at home during the ceremony and have a sense that representatives from each tradition have a significant role to play in it. What really helps is when the clergy concerned minister in a collaborative way, working as a team.

In the past year, I have assisted at baptismal ceremonies in two Anglican churches. On both occasions the Anglican priest and I got together prior to the ceremony to determine how we could best plan the rite so as to ensure appropriate participation in a way in which a proper parity of esteem for both traditions could be shown. Respecting the canonical requirements of both churches we were able to come up with a 'division of labour' so that nobody felt left out or overlooked. In one case the Anglican priest said the prayer of blessing over the baptismal water and presided at the baptism, while I proclaimed the Gospel and the prayer of the faithful. I came away from these experiences utterly convinced of the unsurpassable value of time spent in mutual preparation by both clergy in a spirit of co-operative partnership. Furthermore I am equally convinced of the value of putting a high premium on ensuring parity of esteem for both traditions in the way in which such liturgical rites are celebrated.

Not every reader might be comfortable with my taking my cue in this regard from a current value in civic society. It does not mean that it is always right for Christian churches to take the lead from norms in civil

society. It is not to gloss over the reality of profound disagreement on matters where the truth is perceived to be at stake. In terms of actual pastoral practice it is a reminder to us that we can disagree without being disagreeable. We may believe a theological position to be untrue but the obligation to treat the holder of that position with respect remains. Is this not the way in which Jesus of Nazareth relates to all who come his way? Was it not his way of giving the same dignity and respect to Samaritan and Roman as to those of his own tradition that marked him out from his contemporaries? Is there not something essentially very Christ-like in this notion of parity of esteem?

Supporting the couple

The principle of showing great respect for the sovereignty of each individual conscience is of paramount importance in the ministry to couples preparing for and involved in an inter-church marriage. Decisions about the church in which the wedding is to take place and in relation to the religious upbringing of children are for the couple to discern and decide upon themselves, taking due cognizance of the expectations of the churches from which they come and of the sensitivities of their families, friends, community context etc. The role of clergy is a supportive one, respecting the integrity and judgement of the couple as to what is best for them in their particular circumstances. Respect and support in no way rules out the posing of challenging questions and the willingness to raise another perspective on how they might approach their situation.

A minister or priest in this context has a role comparable to that of the one who gives the Spiritual Exercises. One is called to be present in a discreet, unobtrusive way to the couple, at times pointing out what can lead to consolation and desolation and how to move forward when they find themselves in either position. Like the one who gives the Exercises, the minister/priest does not interfere or pry but realizes that the Spirit of God is the real director, the ultimately reliable guide, and endeavours not to get in the way!

As with the baptism of children the ministry of support is ideally and hopefully done in tandem with a minister of another tradition. Both work together to support the couple as they travel along their pilgrim way. The support ministry is a joint effort. One possible comparison might be with the way in which nowadays when involved in a directed retreat one is part of a team which meets daily and which is a support to the directors in their ministry of listening, responding and directing. Those of us who have experience of this know how enriching it can be

and how it facilitates better quality direction. In a parallel way, clergy supporting a couple in a mixed marriage should function as a team and their shared ministry in this team should be of assistance to them in arriving at, and remaining in, that place of inner freedom which helps effective ministry to flourish.

Worshipping together

Another problem area in inter-church work is that of joint and shared worship. I have particular personal experience of this from my part in helping to prepare joint acts of worship in integrated schools here in Northern Ireland. Integrated schools comprise students from the two main traditions and seek to create and foster an atmosphere in which persons from both traditions (or from none) will feel welcome and included.

Over the past three years I have been involved in the planning and celebration of acts of worship for Ash Wednesday and Remembrance Day. It has proved a great challenge to devise a form of worship with which students and teachers from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds could feel simultaneously comfortable.

Ashes!

The tradition of signing foreheads with ashes as a sign of the call to repentance is perceived as being a very Catholic tradition in this part of the world. Therefore it is very important for Protestant participants that the reception of ashes be optional and that nobody feels compelled to go up to receive them. Any Protestant teacher/student who does wish to receive them should feel equally free to do so. One possible way of dealing with this situation would be to omit the giving of ashes altogether. In that case one would be leaving out an aspect of marking that particular liturgical day which Catholic teachers and students would cherish and would want to have included as an option.

The organizers have attempted to come up with a form of service with which all can feel at home and in which each can take part in the degree and to the extent they feel comfortable with. To that end at the point where the ashes are distributed three options are put before the assembly. A student/teacher can choose to do any one of the following: a) come up to have ashes imposed; b) come up and receive a prayer of blessing from one of the chaplains; c) remain in their place and pray quietly. Practice has demonstrated that this approach respects the sensitivities of individual conscience and the honoured traditions of particular parts of the Christian family. Leaving out the ceremony of

ashes might leave the Catholics feeling that aspects of their tradition are never included in a joint service. Insisting on ashes for all could leave the Protestants feeling that a Catholic format was being thrust on them.

In the earlier years of planning these services, we worked hard to arrive at a very neutral series of words and gestures. With the passage of time it has been found good to include in the format elements which are specifically Catholic or Protestant so that the value of accepting and appreciating difference can be promoted. For example, if there is a blessing at the close of the service, we encourage the students to feel free to make the sign of the cross or not according to what they sense is right for them. This is yet another way of furthering that parity of esteem referred to earlier.

Remembrance

For readers in other parts of the world, it may seem strange that there would be difficulties in having a school assembly to mark Remembrance Day, in terms of inter-church sensitivities. The historical reality here in Northern Ireland is that Remembrance Day commemorations are very much regarded as being part of the tradition of the Protestant churches. In general, Catholic churches would not normally have Remembrance Day ceremonies. Like all general statements, there are exceptions to this. Not all Protestants would attend Remembrance ceremonies and there are some Catholics who would attend and see this as something of great significance for them. The problems relating to this kind of service are more political and cultural than purely theological.

It is not just in this situation that ecumenical difficulties are not specifically theological. When one brings together members of different Christian traditions there is an encounter of cultures as well as of a set of religious understandings. In the context of a school, how can a service be arranged which will be a recognizable Remembrance service to Protestant members of the congregation and at the same time be an act of worship with which Catholic members can feel comfortable? This has constituted quite a challenge for those organizing it.

In the first place, what is it that one is remembering? It has been helpful to highlight three different groups; those who died in World Wars One and Two (many of them from Northern Ireland, both Catholic and Protestant), those who have died as a result of violence here (including relatives and friends of teachers, staff and students who lost their lives on account of the Troubles) and all those who suffer and die because of warfare in our world today. It is an occasion to remember

with profound respect all those who have died. It is not an occasion for the glorification of war or for the expression of any form of jingoistic nationalism.

Some students and staff would want to wear the poppy as an emblem of remembering while others would not want to wear one. Here the wearing of the poppy is taken as an indication of an expression of British identity. Many of the students and staff from a Catholic background would see their identity as being Irish rather than British and would therefore feel uncomfortable about wearing a poppy themselves. We have encouraged participants to feel free in relation to this symbol and to wear it if they so wish but to feel themselves under no pressure to wear or not to wear. At the heart of the service has been the observance of the two minutes silence. This has been observed with reverence and devotion. Ensuring that this service is celebrated in an inclusive way in which all traditions feel respected has been a particularly demanding task for those of us on the organizing group. Over the past two years the effort and hard work have proved worthwhile. Like much ecumenical work, the effort to be really respectful of differing traditions necessitates hard work, sensitivity, a willingness to meet people half-way, a readiness to live with difference and a capacity to be patient in the midst of the imperfections of others and of ourselves. One also has to be ready to take risks and not to be too crestfallen when things do not work out as originally planned. I remember a brief meeting with some students after one of these services when they expressed great pain about the way in which things had been arranged and then complained implicitly about an emphasis on prayers for peace in our time and not enough on the sacrifice of the soldiers of Ulster in the fields of Flanders. Others would wonder why one would even think of having a Remembrance service at all. When asked about the matter, most students and teachers have spoken appreciatively of the opportunity to gather as a community of Catholics and Protestants to remember the victims of war and to pray for peace in a manner respectful of both traditions.

Transcending denominationalism

Emerging from these reflections I would propose a further agenda for us in all the churches. One of the challenges that faces us as we enter the new millennium is the need to transcend a narrow denominationalism in which churches become overly introverted and lose a sense of being part of the greater, universal Church. There is the ever-present danger of becoming caught up in a never-ending round of maintenance work

and losing touch with the greater, outward-directed mission of the church universal. An antidote to this is to have a strong sense of the scandal of Christian disunity and to appreciate that this disunity is an obstacle to people coming to faith in Christ in today's world. Echoing the prayer of Jesus for unity in the fourth Gospel, 'May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me' (Jn 17:21), Christians in our time are invited to pray and work for that unity. This is an urgent summons that leaves no room for complacency.

The temptation for the churches is to have a 'business as usual' mentality and to leave the work of ecumenism to those working on theological dialogues and on official inter-church bodies. This is not to deny the significance and necessity of such groups. The call to ecumenical work is not confined to these but is the concern of all Christians. It has to be on the agenda of every local parish and congregation. Unless we are convinced that church disunity threatens to undermine all our efforts to bear witness to the Good News, there will be insufficient passion to rouse us to move forward.

Each denomination needs to grasp that it is incomplete without the others, that we all need each other's charisms and gifts. As a Catholic, I would be impoverished if I did not have access in some way to the dignified liturgy of Anglicanism, the emphasis on the sovereignty of God in Presbyterianism, the proclamation of the social gospel in Methodism, the principle of sacramentality in Catholicism, etc. Each church/ecclesial community needs to appreciate that the task of mission can only be lived out faithfully if we are aware of our need of each other.

One practical way of counteracting any tendency towards excessive denominationalism is to commit oneself to attend worship in a church apart from one's own on a regular basis. In recent years I have adopted the practice insofar as it is possible to attend a service in a Protestant church once weekly. This serves to guard against any narrowing of one's ecumenical horizons. It would not be possible for everyone to do this but if we take ecumenism seriously some time needs to be invested in actually being with Christians from other traditions. My own experience of attending weekly has been enormously helpful for me. I have heard many good sermons, have been introduced to a great breadth of hymnody and to a variety of forms of public prayer.

This essay is a series of reflections coming out of the experience of the very particular context of work here in Northern Ireland. If such inter-church ministry is possible against the background of the conflicted situation here then surely it is possible anywhere.

Occasionally when visiting in other parts of the world I have been shocked by the lack of contact between Christian churches. I have found it surprising that in places where there are no particular obstacles to ecumenical co-operation, the will to even begin it seems very faint. Sometimes I have even come across a fatalistic and passive acceptance of the fact of Christian disunity unmarked by any trace of discomfort at the scandal represented by this division. What are the possibilities and the needs in the situation in which you find yourself? Is all that can be done on the ecumenical front being attempted? If not, why not?

Tom Layden is a Jesuit priest. He lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where he works in the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises, adult religious education and ecumenical ministry.