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A Lovers' Quarrel?

A Roman Catholic Comment on the WCC Framework

My first reaction to the World Council of Churches' Framework for Common Prayer statement was one of frustration: why did this happen? Weren't we supposed to be growing closer together? In my experience in the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) sharing common worship is easy, isn't it? Why couldn't the "adults" get their act together and realise this?

My second reaction was to defend my apostolic sisters and brothers. The Orthodox must feel frustrated that they were not being listened to that they did not have an equal share in shaping the ecumenical movement through the World Council of Churches (WCC).

My third reaction was one of sadness. At least the Orthodox and Protestants were in a relationship where they could agree to disagree. Could I only watch the crisis unfold? The Roman Catholic Church has come far in opening up to other churches; still we are not full members, but observers at the WCC.

RENEWED OPENNESS IN THE PARTNERSHIP

I would compare the statement of Orthodox and Protestant churches to an important stage in a relationship. One partner is sure that everything is fine. The couple is getting to know each other better, sharing the most important things in life. Suddenly the other partner says, "stop! You are not hearing my voice." This is remarkably hurtful for both sides. "How can anything be wrong?" the partner asks, "you never said anything before?" The validity of the entire length of the relationship is called into question.

The very fact that there is space for both partners to fully express how they feel is very important. Now the encounter can be renewed on a deeper, more equal level. Renewal will not be easy, but it is worth trying. In this way the statement is positive. It indicates that the dialogue between Orthodox and Protestant will progress in a more open way. Even if, at first sight, it seems like an invalidation of what went before.

SMELLS AND BELLS

In many ways it does seem like a step back. As a Catholic raised in a secular context where the state church is Anglican, in some ways it is easier for me to relate to Protestant concern that the statement will halt valuable progress. I can understand why Lutheran Bishop Margot KÄSEMANN left the WCC Central Committee after the statement. She said, if the member churches could not worship together, what is the point of the WCC?

From a feminist perspective I am also frustrated with the statement's caution on the use of inclusive language for God. Although I can see why it is so diplomatic on women's ordination, it is still frustrating. Above all, in my context, Christianity itself is a minority faith. Attempts to preserve the dividing lines between denominations seem all the more absurd when churches them-

selves are emptying and most people cannot explain the reasons for the differences anyway.

Yet in other ways the Catholic Church is closer to the Orthodox Church. The first time I attended an Orthodox service I understood what many Protestants found strange about Catholicism. In Britain you call it the "smells and bells", the ritual, the shift of focus from words and the head to senses and the whole body. The rhythm of the liturgy, the pattern gives me space to relax and pray much better than if I have to concentrate on some photocopied bit of paper full of text. Saints and tradition are familiar territory for me and I would not want to give them up. I can see why the Orthodox do not want change imposed on them in the name of unity.

A CAT RELUCTANTLY DIPPING ITS PAWS IN THE WATER

How does this feel from outside? How does it feel from the vantage point of a church that is on the sidelines as the relationship goes through a crisis? The Catholic Church has made enormous strides in dialogue with other churches since the Second Vatican Council, which stated that it "exhorts all Catholic faithful to recognise the signs of the times and take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism," that is, to promote Christian unity (Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2 XI 1965, § 4). Most of the relations with other confessions are bilateral ones, bringing to mind the image of a cat reluctantly dipping its paws in the water, afraid to get too wet.

The Catholic Church is active on the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, which produced the 'Lima' document of church agreement on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (online at www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/bem, see also Dagmar HELLER, *Eucharistic Fellowship in the Third Millennium?* in the *Ecumenical Review* IV 1999). So why can the Catholic Church not become a full member of WCC? Rome is still reluctant to take the risk of being just one voice among many churches as a full WCC member.

The Catholic Catechism acknowledges that truth can be found beyond its confines. At the same time, the Catholic Church states, "Christ bestowed unity on his Church from the beginning. This unity, we believe, subsists in the Catholic Church as something She can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time. Christ always gives His Church the gift of unity, but the Church must always pray and work to maintain, reinforce, and perfect the unity that Christ wills for Her."

CHANGE OF HEART AND HOLINESS OF LIFE

This striving towards unity includes ecumenical formation, dialogue, collaboration and *common prayer*. "Change of heart and holiness of life, along with public



and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement," (Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§ 820 & 821).

On *common worship*, Vatican II is more reticent. Worship with the Orthodox is especially encouraged as their sacraments are recognised by the Catholic Church (*Unitatis Redintegratio* § 15). Differences with the Protestant churches are much greater, on both the sacraments and moral teaching (§s 22 & 23). Common worship is a witness of the unity of the Church, and as such, it is not yet generally possible. Still, it can sometimes be allowed because of the grace that it brings; the local bishops can decide (§ 8).

It is up to the local church to decide. This is the way forward for ecumenism, as I understand it. In my home parish in Cardiff, Christians of all denominations meet together to pray and study during Lent. These "Lent Groups", composed of around ten people from the different churches in the area, meet together in someone's house and celebrate at Easter with a common church service. For me this was my first real ecumenical experience. We came to know each other on our faith journey together as Christians, at the absolute grass roots level. My church was actively involved. Both the WCC statement and the Catholic Catechism actively encourage such activity, and it will continue.

A WIDENING GAP

Yet there is still a difference between meeting and praying together, and worshipping together. What is the difference? The Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales (<http://217.19.224.165/frameset.htm>) published a statement on sharing church buildings, with special regards to the rural context where they state that non-Catholics can take an active part in Catholic worship, reading the Bible and prayers, although they can only receive a blessing, not Communion. Joint services between denominations are actively encouraged, but again, without Communion. Yet again, inability to share the Eucharist is the stumbling block.

For most Catholics and for most Orthodox, as I understand it, a proper worship service includes the Eucharist. Both apostolic churches teach that the Eucharist cannot yet be shared. Many certainly see full Communion as the ultimate goal of ecumenism rather than a stage to help us on the way. Though there are different views within the Catholic Church on this, in parishes on the ground shared Communion is happening. I hope that this practice will gain momentum from

the grassroots, rather than waiting (indefinitely?) for a change of dogma from "on high".

Sadly, many Catholics, laity and clergy, now exercise their individual conscience against the official Church teaching not only on the Eucharist but also on other issues, notably contraception. This is a very different issue and not our topic here, but contraception is nevertheless the wedge which opened a widening gap between teaching and practice within the Catholic Church. My experience is that the same is happening in many places with the Eucharist; people are beginning to ignore teaching they do not see as justifiable.

A PAUSE HALFWAY UP THE HILL

I can relate to what I see as a more Protestant view. That is that worship is more than prayer in that it is a whole liturgical celebration including readings, prayer, symbolic acts, and meditation. Such a worship service is a true service for me. However, if we are talking about the main, Sunday service, the most important part of the week, then I need the Eucharist too. Not absolutely every Sunday, but most Sundays. This is also the difficulty in the WCC statement. Discussing it with other students, Orthodox and Protestant, we found that the Eucharist was where the gap between our understandings of partial and full liturgy became difficult to bridge.

We cannot call a service "ecumenical" unless the participants believe it is and feel that they are indeed a visible sign of the unity of the Church. This can be a prayer, a worship service, a Eucharistic liturgy, if it includes everyone. I do not see the WCC statement as a step back, because it openly states the reality that we face: our churches are different and have a different understanding of what it means to worship together.

The churches of WCC can now pause, halfway up the hill, and decide together which path to take next.

Discussion and encounter renders each party more aware of where the other really thinks they should be going. I wish that my church were officially part of this process. My experience in my home parish and in WSCF leads me to believe that these obstacles can be overcome, starting from the grassroots, where relationships between people are stronger than the official barriers that divide us.



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