

ECUMENICAL TRENDS

Vol 48 No 1 ■ Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute ■ January 2019

A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2019 Reflections on an Ecumenical Spirituality

By Gerard A.J. Granado

My dear friends in Christ, this evening I would like to share with you some thoughts on a theme, a virtue, a practice which I consider to be critical to the ecumenical endeavor. In fact, as I see it, in a very real sense it lies at the *heart* of Ecumenism. In so doing, I'll be building upon the very last verse of the second reading that we heard earlier (Romans 12:1-13).

Before embarking on that reflection, though, I would like us to venture a little further afield and then wind our way back to our theme of the evening. (For those of you who are physics-minded, we would be making a centripetal movement of sorts!) In going this route, I am trying not to be guilty of something that I often lament, i.e. an approach to issues that I deem "atomistic." Such an approach involves lifting out for consideration a single facet of a much larger complex without due regard to the wider issue at hand – the "bigger picture." So then, although – given our time constraints and other limitations – we won't be able to do a full-fledged "painting" of the "bigger picture," we can at least try to "sketch" it and catch a glimpse at it. So, here goes:

In his reception speech for the prestigious "Templeton Prize" (in March 2015), the then eighty-six year old Jean Vanier – renowned Canadian philosopher/theologian and founder of the L'Arche Community – had this to say: "*Our world...is at a crisis point today. Either we will move together towards a deeper unity of all people, in a spirit of openness, fraternity and mutual respect, or the divisions that exist will grow into terrible forces of fear and hate, encouraging wars, terrorism and even the use of atomic weapons, each of which is a form of suicide for humanity.*"

This statement is in stark, sobering contrast to another statement which Jean Vanier makes as a comment on the Prologue to the Gospel of John. The relevant statement is to be found in the first chapter of his book entitled *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*. There Vanier says: "In the beginning, before all things *communion* was: *communion* between God and the 'Logos' – the 'Word.' At one moment in time the 'Logos' became flesh and entered history. He came to lead us all into this *communion*, which is the very life of God." [my emphasis]. Vanier then goes on to describe the Prologue of John's gospel as: "an extraordinary ...mystical vision of *the healing of humanity* which," he says, "serves as a *capsule version of the whole gospel.*" [my emphasis].

Earlier, in the introduction to the same book, Vanier makes the point that, in choosing certain moments and signs and miracles, it is the ultimate purpose of the author of John's gospel "to lead all disciples of Jesus into an experience of *communion* with God." [my emphasis]. At the end of chapter 1 of his book, Vanier concludes with these words: "The gospel of John, then, is...the story of *how [Jesus] leads us all from behind the barriers of fear and indifference into a new unity, a new peace* through a relationship with him which flows from God and brings us into the heart of God." [my emphasis] Absolutely fascinating! A "new unity"! A "new peace"! "Communion"! "Bringing us into the heart of God!"

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Gerard A.J. Granado, M.Th. (Edinburgh) is the General Secretary of the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC).

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At this stage of our reflection, I would like to draw our attention to Vanier's repeated use of the word "*Communion*," and to also introduce the corresponding Latin and Greek terms – viz. "*Communio*" and "*Koinonia*" respectively. The Greek form of the word is the one most widely used in ecumenical theological circles. It is most commonly translated into English as "*Fellowship*." What is important to keep in mind, is that this is not "just another concept" to engage our academic interest. Rather, it is a term that in fact speaks of the ultimate aim and purpose of the ecumenical endeavor. So, we simply introduce it here, and later on will try to link it into an even more fundamental reality of the Christian Faith.

Having flagged the very critical notion of "*Koinonia*," then, let us return now to the two contrasting statements of Jean Vanier that we considered earlier. As we read the statements, what becomes palpably evident is the huge gap – the chasm! – that there is between what currently exists in the world in terms of human relationships, and what we are being re-called to "as it was in the beginning." It is a situation of fragmentation and animosity versus Communion ("*Koinonia*"). The question that therefore arises is: *How is this "gap" to be bridged?* What is the means and instrument of achieving the (restoration of) this Communion of which the gospel of John – and indeed the whole of the New Testament – speaks? In perusing the New Testament Scriptures, the answer that we discover is: "*the Church!*" This is especially so in the letters of Paul.

Throughout the letters of Paul, there is an unmistakable insistence by him on the unity of the Church. This emphasis of Paul's becomes abundantly clear as we course through his letters with any degree of attentiveness. We can't help but notice it! Of course, again – given our constraints – it won't be possible for us to look at each of these instances *per se*. We would therefore highlight only two outstanding instances where this insistence of Paul comes into sharp focus.

At the beginning of chapter four of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul *beseches* the Community at Ephesus in these words: "*Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together.*" He goes on to elaborate on the matter saying: "There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into the same hope when you were called." He concludes: "There is one Lord, one faith,

one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all." (Ephesians 4:3-6) The emphasis on the matter of "*Oneness*" is inescapable in this passage.

The other passage from Paul's letters that has always intrigued me comes from the beginning of chapter two of his letter to the Philippians. Here Paul exhorts the community of the baptized at Philippi, to: "...be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind." He then goes on to say something that is very interesting. He tells the community: "That is the one thing that would make me *completely happy*." (Philipp.2:2) Very interesting! *Unity* of the ecclesial community is what will make Paul completely happy!

After his exhortation to unity, Paul then proceeds to give his readers the "recipe" for achieving this unity, advising them that "there must be no competition among you, no conceit; but *everybody is to be self-effacing*...so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead." (Philipp. 2:3&4) What then follows is, to me, a most astounding and instructive "punch line." In pointing his readers to the basis of his entreaty and "recipe" for Unity, Paul cites the words of the well-known and oft-quoted Christological hymn – a hymn that sings of the self-emptying (the "*kenosis*") of the Word in the Incarnation. So, Jesus – the Word made flesh – is Himself the example of an essential pre-requisite for unity, i.e. the ability to be self-emptying / "self-effacing."

The relevant passage says: "His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but *emptied himself* to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; ...he was *humbler yet*, even to *accepting death*, death on a cross." (Philipp. 2:5-8) I am sure that many of us are well acquainted with *this passage of Scripture*. We could ask, however: how many of us *locate it within the context of the unity of the church* as done and intended by Paul? (I would want to imagine that – in many instances – this would be a prime example of the "atomistic" approach that I mentioned at the outset! Lifting out this wonderful hymn in isolation from the context that Paul intended in citing it).

So, hopefully, we have become aware of the undeniable insistence by Paul on the Unity of the Church. The question

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Ecumenical Trends

EDITOR, Rev. James Loughran, SA ■ ASSISTANT TO THE EDITOR, Christine Breglia ■ BUSINESS MANAGER, Veronica Sullivan, Editorial Office ■ Ecumenical Trends, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 1960, New York, NY 10115 ■ Business and Subscription Office, Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333.

Manuscripts sent to the editor should be in either WordPerfect or Microsoft Word. It is preferable to electronically transfer submitted texts using the software above via e-mail to jlgeii@aol.com. *Ecumenical Trends* is published eleven times a year (monthly except August) by the Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute. *Ecumenical Trends* is a member of the Associated Church Press and the Catholic Press Association. This periodical is indexed in the Catholic Periodical and Literature Index (CPLI), a product of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606, USA. email atla@atla.com, www. [Http://www.atla.com](http://www.atla.com). Microfilm copies are available from National Archive Publishing Company: P.O. Box 998, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-0998. Subscription Rates: Print and digital version, US Domestic \$30.00 USD/1 yr; \$56.00 USD/2 yrs. Canadian & Foreign \$40.00 USD/1 yr.; \$66.00 USD/2yrs. Digital version only: \$15.00/ 1 yr. Bulk rates are available upon request. Address for Subscriptions: Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333 (ISSN 0360 9073) Periodicals Postage Paid at Garrison, NY 10524 and additional Mailing Offices. Website: www.geii.org

that remains, however, is: *Why?* Why is Paul “hung up” in such an uncompromising way on the Unity of the Church? I want to suggest that we can find the answer to that question in chapter five of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. It is there that Paul gives us a glimpse of the “bigger picture” when he expounds with such beauty and clarity saying: “...God was *reconciling the world* to Himself in Christ.” (2Cor.5:19) Something big and beautiful has been going on – a *great work of reconciliation and healing* - and *GOD* is the one who has been doing it – doing it *in Christ!* As Paul would say quite emphatically in the preceding verse of the same passage: “*It is all God’s work!*” (2Cor.5:18). Just the thought of it is enough to inspire in us a sense of awe and wonder!

Then comes the critical connection when Paul makes the link between this great reconciling, healing *Opus Dei* (“Work of God”) and the involvement of the Church. Paul very tersely says: “...God ...gave us *the work of handing on this reconciliation.*” (2Cor.5:18). He very quickly reinforces this point when he says quite crisply: “So, *we are ambassadors for Christ.*” (2Cor.5:20) Awesome! The community of those who have been incorporated into Christ by baptism – the ecclesial community, the Church – has been given the task of handing on this great work of reconciliation that God has been doing all the while. As such, we have become “ambassadors for Christ.” A terrifying kind of wonder! To put it another way: the Church has been called to witness to God’s reconciling, healing presence in the world.

In order to do this, it follows that the Church itself has to become a model of reconciliation and healing in the very way that its members relate to one another. Here, *unity of the Church* becomes the *touchstone for reconciled living*. As the old adage goes: “*A divided Church cannot heal a broken world!*”

This theme is also taken up and elaborated upon in the letter to the Ephesians. There Paul tells us that this ongoing reconciling, healing work of God in the world, this gradually unfolding plan of God, this “*mysterium,*” to which the Church has been called to witness by its Unity, is a “*mystery unknown* to anyone in past generations,” and “*kept hidden in God*” but “*now revealed* through the Spirit...” (Ephes.3:5&9). And “*Why?*” Paul asks rhetorically. His answer: “So that...*only now, through the church*” the world may come to know “*how comprehensive* [all-embracing] *God’s wisdom* really is exactly according to *the plan which He had had from all eternity in Christ Jesus...*” (cf Ephes.3:5-10) You would recall that it is in this very same letter to the Ephesians that we saw earlier how Paul beseeched the ecclesial community to “*do all that you can to preserve the unity...*” Now we understand why!

But Paul does not leave us with merely a vague notion of a comprehensive plan of reconciliation and healing which is witnessed through the Church. In his letter to the Ephesians, he also tells us what the plan entails and pro-

vides us with a “snap-shot,” so to speak, of exactly what this life of unity – this “comprehensive,” all-embracing plan – looks like. As Paul outlines and portrays it, it means, in very practical terms, that *previously antagonistic groups of the human family* now have the opportunity and the means to *become one “in Christ”* who, for Paul, is the “New Adam” (i.e., *the “New Humanity”*). Speaking of the Jews and the gentiles, he says: “it means that gentiles now share the same inheritance, that they are parts of the same body, and that the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the gospel.” (Ephes.3:6)

What Paul is saying, is that all peoples – *the entire human family* – are now, in Christ, *God’s covenanted people, a plan* which God had “*from all eternity in Christ*” but which was “*kept hidden in God*” and is only “*now revealed.*” This plan is to be witnessed to “*through the Church.*” No more distinctions on the basis of exclusivity, sense of superiority and privilege. In Christ, all are now on equal footing. The door has been flung wide open! The human family is now called to be one in Christ (the “New Adam”), and the Church is called to witness to that reality.

In this understanding of the Church and its role – this ecclesiology – Paul’s thinking is very much in keeping with the understanding of Israel’s role as God’s covenanted people. As a devout, zealous, Pharisaic scholar, Paul would have had a very firm grasp of this issue. Throughout the story of God’s plan of salvation as outlined in the bible, an integral and vital part of that plan was God’s formation of a people that he could call his own and who could call Him their God – a covenanted people.

This people, drawn from diverse tribes and “houses,” would be a people who would bring honor and glory to God’s holy Name, by witnessing to the rest of their world – “the nations” – what reconciled human living is all about. Their social relationships would be characterized primarily by justice, respect and care in a setting of diversity. They were to be an exemplary people, a model of what the wider human family is called to be and how it is called to live. (Of course, we know the story of how often this role was compromised through injustice to the poor, etc. It was on these occasions that the prophets would arise and call Israel back to fidelity to its role – its commitment to the covenant).

Paul’s understanding of the Church, then, is of a new Israel, a new covenanted people – “the Israel of God.” (Galatians 6:16). The Church is called to witness to what is possible in terms of unity – Communion, Fellowship, “*Koinonia*” – among the wider human family. In this regard, the words of the theologian Mary Tanner are quite insightful and instructive. Tanner says: “*The Church is the world ahead of itself!*” (Mary Tanner is a British Anglican Old Testament Scholar and Professor, and member and former Moderator of the World Council of Churches’ (WCC’s) Faith and Order Commission).

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In his book entitled *Christ and His Church*, Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, comes at the issue from another angle. In the section of his book headed *The Gift of "Communion,"* he makes quite a sobering statement. In emphasizing the importance of the witness value of maintaining and nurturing Unity within the Church, Benedict says: "...if the gift of unity in the Holy Spirit does not exist, the fragmentation of humanity is inevitable." (At this point, it might prove enlightening to throw our minds back to Jean Vanier's statement lamenting the direction of fragmentation in which the human family is heading, along with Paul's exhortation to the church at Ephesus beseeching them to "do all [they] can to preserve the Unity..."). Benedict goes on to say quite confidently: "'Communion' is truly the Good News."

The ecclesiology implicit in the above-cited statement of Benedict, is consistent with the ecclesiologies of both Paul and the Second Vatican Council. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church – "*Lumen Gentium* (L.G.)" – the Council says this: "...the Church is a kind of sacrament...of the unity of all mankind." (L.G. no.1). An interesting choice of word to describe the Church – a "sacrament"! Whereas the word "sign" is also used in the same sentence of the document to describe the Church, it would seem that the Council Fathers had a preference for the word "sacrament" seeing that it is given priority as the first word used. If we are to appreciate the full import of what is being said of the Church by using the word "sacrament" to describe it, we would have to employ the understanding of "sacrament" in Roman Catholic theology.

Those who are conversant with Roman Catholic sacramental theology would know that a sacrament is not understood as merely a sign or a symbol. Much more than that, a sacrament is a sign which effects and makes real what it signifies. If, therefore, the Church is "a sacrament...of the unity of all mankind," it follows that the Church, by virtue of its very nature, has the responsibility of effecting and making real in the world that which it signifies – viz. a reconciled, united human family, healed of fragmentation and the deep destructive wounds of division. It is the pursuit of Vanier's "new unity" and "new peace" – the establishment of "Koinonia"!

You would recall that – earlier in our sharing – when we introduced and flagged the notion of "Koinonia" ("Fellowship"), I mentioned that at a later stage we would link that notion to a much more fundamental reality of the Christian Faith. Well, I think that this point is as good as any to do so. The reality of the Christian Faith to which I referred as being even more fundamental, is actually absolutely fundamental. I am referring, of course, to the Most Blessed Trinity! The Trinity – three distinct persons in one God, an undivided Unity in diversity – is the ultimate ground and model of "Koinonia" ("Fellowship") and therefore the

ultimate basis of the ecumenical endeavor – i.e. the quest for the visible unity of the divided church. (Of course, coming from the land of the Trinity – "La Trinidad" – as I do, I ought to have a special interest in the Blessed Trinity!). We will make another connection with the Blessed Trinity in another segment of our reflection.

Let us return now to that awesome, reconciling plan of God as Paul presents it. For Paul, there are implications and lived consequences of this plan for the ecclesial community – those entrusted with the responsibility of witnessing to *koinonia*. Addressing the gentile Christian Community in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says: "...now in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far apart from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ...So you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors: you are citizens like all the saints, and part of God's household" (Ephesians 2:13&19). A family portrait has been painted! (The Greek word for "household" – "*oikos*" – that Paul uses in this passage is the very word from which the term "ecumenical" is derived. In Ephes. 2:19 it is used in one of its variant forms "*oikeioi*", which literally means "family members").

"In Christ" and "through the Church," then, a major rapprochement has occurred between alienated factions of the human family. A movement from hostility to hospitality has taken place. Interestingly, this is one of the three movements of the spiritual life identified by the celebrated spiritual guide and writer of the twentieth century, Fr. Henri Nouwen. More importantly, it is in fact a movement, a transition which – again in his letter to the Ephesians - Paul identifies as effected by the death of Jesus. In Ephesians 2:16, Paul makes an astounding statement in this regard. He says of the crucified Jesus that "In his own person he killed the hostility"! In fact, that is a repetition – a reiteration – of a similar statement made in verse fourteen. He further says of the crucified Lord: "...he is the peace between us [i.e. the two alienated factions of the human family]"

The passage to which I refer is worth reading in its entirety. Paul writes: "For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility...This was to create one single New Man in himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace through the cross, to unite them both in a single Body and reconcile them with God. In his own person he killed the hostility. Later he came to bring the good news of peace, peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near at hand. Through him, both of us have in the one Spirit our way to come to the Father." (Ephesians 2:14-18). What a fascinating, awesome process has taken place through the Cross of Christ! The Trinitarian dynamic is easy to discern.

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This section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians brings us – explicitly – to the key theme of this evening's reflection. As mentioned before, it is one that is highlighted in the last verse of the reading from Romans that we heard earlier. There, Paul invites his readers to “*make hospitality your special care.*” (Romans 12:13). Using earlier the interpretative “lens,” so to speak, of Henri Nouwen's work, we had brought into sharper focus what Paul identified as entailed in *the dynamic of God's reconciling work - i.e. a movement from hostility to hospitality.* I want to suggest that “*hospitality*” lies, in a very real sense, at the heart of the ecumenical endeavor.

When we examine the notion, we find that – in essence – *hospitality* is really *the welcoming embrace of the stranger; the “Other” – in his/her “otherness.”* In embracing the “Other,” there is always the great temptation to want to transform the other into someone that more closely resembles us, something that we are more familiar and comfortable with. We want to re-make the Other in our own “image and likeness.” In so doing, we effectively end up “playing God”! In his book entitled *The God Who Won't Let Go*, Jesuit priest, Peter van Breemen says this: “To behold the other in his or her truth is the starting point of love; ...Without this truthful beholding, all our further love rests shakily on a weak foundation. We need enormous discipline to let go of our stereotypes, our own advantages, and our expectations in order to behold the other as she really is. Normally, we perceive quite selectively; our filters obscure our beholding. We do not see the other in *his* reality, but distorted through *our* perception. Pure attentiveness means not favouring any aspect, rejecting nothing, and judging nothing. It also means relinquishing all anxiety for self-affirmation, all curiosity, and all criticism.”

What Fr. Breemen details here, is in fact the self-effacing, the self-emptying, the “kenosis” that Paul spoke of in chapter two of his letter to the Philippians as a pre-requisite for building “*koinonia.*” Coming from our various denominational affiliations and backgrounds, we are all strangers to one another, and therefore need – as Paul says – to “*make hospitality our special care.*” In another part of his letter to the Romans, Paul – as he did in Philippians with the kenotic hymn – gives his Christological basis for the practice of hospitality. He says: “*Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you.*” (Rom. 15:7).

In chapter twenty four of Luke's gospel, an incident is related which brings home in a truly marvelous way the importance and consequence of hospitality. The story is popularly known as “The Road to Emmaus.” Having witnessed the crucifixion, and not knowing that the Resurrection has occurred, two disciples – Cleopas and his friend – are walking away from Jerusalem quite dejected, hopes dashed, recounting the tragic events of the past Friday. As they walk, *a stranger* comes alongside them and joins their conversa-

tion, giving them an enlightening, new perspective on the very happenings that they are discussing. When the disciples reached where they were going, the stranger made as if to continue on his way; but the disciples invited him in to their place for the night. *They extended hospitality to the stranger.* Then, later when they were *at table, they recognized the stranger as the Risen Eucharistic Lord.* It was *as a consequence of their hospitality* that they recognized him as such! (cf Luke 24:13-32)

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we also find an encouraging word from the author with regard to the practice of hospitality. He tells us: “...remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some have entertained angels without knowing.” (Heb. 13:2) The allusion here, of course, is to that celebrated visit of three angels to Abraham as recorded in Genesis 18. As many of you might know, this angelic visit has been immortalized in the famous fifteenth century icon of “The Holy Trinity” by the Russian Orthodox monk – Andrei Rublev. We cite this icon and its name with interest and will comment on it a little later.

But, my friends, hospitality is not the romantic venture that it might first appear to be on the surface of things. *In the exercise of hospitality, one is also called to embrace vulnerability.* Given our human nature, we would much prefer the guarantee and security of things like “*identity*” to the uncertainties and exposure of nakedness and vulnerability. But – consistent with the paradoxes of much of the Christian Faith – vulnerability is life-giving. *The Cross of Jesus is the ultimate in vulnerability;* but it is *a life-giving vulnerability!* Herein lies what Paul speaks of in the first letter to the Corinthians where he mentions *both the “foolishness” and the “power” of the Cross.* (cf 1 Cor. 1:17-25). As we saw earlier in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it is through the Cross that barriers are broken down, that hostility is “killed” and the life-giving movement from hostility to hospitality is effected, thus establishing “*koinonia*” through which the very inner life of the Trinity – an undivided Unity in diversity – is shared and witnessed to. A truly life-giving dynamic!

It is this *sharing in the very life of the Trinity* that Jesus points to when he says: “*I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full.*” (Jn. 10:10) At this point, we might want to recall Jean Vanier's earlier commentary on the prologue of John's gospel where he says that in becoming flesh and entering into history, the “Logos” (“Word”) “*came to lead us into Communion, which is the very life of God*” – “*Koinonia.*”

In the same section of the work of Benedict XVI cited earlier, we find an endorsement of Vanier's position when Benedict says: “*The idea of communion as participation in Trinitarian life is illuminated with special intensity in John's Gospel.*” Shortly before saying this, the Pope emeritus, in

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commenting on Paul's Trinitarian greeting in 2 Cor. 13:14 emphasizes the point that "...the *"koinonia"* of the Holy Spirit [is] not only [a] participation in the divine life more or less singularly, each one individually, but also, logically, as the *"communion"* among believers that the Spirit himself kindles..." The point is clear. *Sharing in the divine life of the Trinity* is not merely a private, individual affair. Rather, it is a matter of what Benedict refers to as Paul's "(insistence on) *fraternal communion*." It would do us well to recall here the statement of Cyprian in the third century on the nature of the Church. He says of the Church that it is "*a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*" Trinity remains the ultimate ground of the ecumenical endeavor.

A few years ago, I was privileged to attend a study session lead by Bishop James Tenga Tenga, the then Secretary of the worldwide Anglican Consultative Council (ACC). In that session, he was sharing some of the challenges and critical tensions that existed within the Anglican Communion. In the course of his presentation, he asked the following question in a very impassioned way. He said: "*Can we not find a way of being together that is life-giving?*" In conversing with him after the session, I said to him: "Bishop James, that question that you asked so passionately is not only relevant to the Anglican Communion. It is in fact *the quintessential question for the ecumenical movement!*"

Bishop Tenga Tenga's question challenges us in terms of the practical steps that need to be taken in facilitating this "*Koinonia*" – this life-giving way of being together and witnessing to the very (Trinitarian) life of God and his reconciling action in the world. What can we do in our own neck of the woods? As a response to that question, I have been advocating for many years that we embark upon the creation of what I term "*Spaces of Hospitality.*" These would essentially be "spaces" where "*the Other*" can be welcomed and embraced in his/her "*Otherness*"; where persons from diverse denominational backgrounds can encounter and engage one another in a non-threatening environment; 'spaces' where personal and communal growth can take place as *the movement from hostility to hospitality is gradually achieved and genuine friendships blossom.* I was recalling recently with a colleague how, in the past, the ecumenical movement was driven in large measure by some wonderful friendships that evolved. Essentially, then, these spaces should be arranged in such a way that they could facilitate people in achieving what St. Pope Paul VI referred to as "*finding the meeting- point beyond the real tensions.*" (cf The Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi.")

Such spaces can range from ecumenical youth groups and encounters to inter-denominational Bible study groups, to ecumenical prayer sessions. With regard to the latter, I was really edified to hear from the former Provincial of the Cluny Sisters in Trinidad, of the wonderful ecumenical

experience that she had a few years ago while visiting a convent of theirs in one African country. That convent had established the custom of having an ecumenical vespers service once a month, followed by the sharing of some light refreshments afterwards. She was quite moved by the fact that, after the vespers, she was taken for a tour of the town driven around by the Anglican Bishop of that diocese accompanied by his wife. The imagination will set the limit on how these "spaces" could look.

A few years ago, in an effort to create such a "*space of hospitality,*" we, in the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC), embarked upon a joint venture with the century-old Benedictine Monastery of Our Lady of Exile – more popularly known as "Mont St. Benedict" – in Trinidad. This was with the launch of what is called the "*Caribbean Regional Centre for Ecumenical Encounter and Dialogue.*" You will observe that in the title of the Centre, the word "*encounter*" comes before the word "*dialogue.*" This is quite deliberate. It is our conviction that, in the ecumenical endeavor, "encounter" should precede "dialogue." Without this one-on-one encounter of persons, dialogue can easily become quite a cerebral exercise – even a subtly competitive one.

I would like, now, to share briefly with you the bases for our choice of the Benedictine monks as a partner in this venture. Firstly, the Benedictine Order emerged in the first millennium of the undivided Church, and therefore stands as a reminder of the fact that we are always being re-called to that Unity of the Body of Christ which, as we have seen, is so essential to the very nature of the Church. Secondly, a key tenet of Benedictine spirituality is "Hospitality." In his Rule, St. Benedict tells the monks that they should "*welcome each guest as you would welcome Christ Himself.*" Thirdly, at the level of the membership of their "Third Order" – their "Oblates" – the Benedictine Order is ecumenical. In that regard, we can say that in that the Benedictines "walk the (ecumenical) talk."

Fourthly, in 1924, Pope Pius XI wrote to the then Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order, entrusting to the Order the responsibility of spearheading the work of ecumenism. This was by way of the Apostolic Letter "*Equidem Verba.*" Although it could be argued that the notion of ecumenism that the Pope was working with at the time was somewhat limited, nevertheless, the request resulted in action "on the ground" with the founding of the historic double-rite monastery in 1925 in Amay-sur-Meuse, Belgium, by Dom Lambert Beaudin. This monastery was later relocated to Chevetogne, influencing the ecumenical movement in France.

Fifthly, in terms of its pilgrims, the character of the Monastery of Our Lady of Exile in Trinidad goes beyond ecumenical to what we can call inter-religious. It provides

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Dialogue in the Search for Church Unity

By Nelson Iluno

The title of this paper is “Receptive Ecumenism: A Strategy for an Ecumenical Dialogue in the Search for Church Unity.” It follows the understanding that one of the new strategies of the modern ecumenical movement is receptive ecumenism. Ecumenism have been one of the central themes for the Church in all ages and the prayer of Christ, “that they may be one” is the great task the Church must foster. “At the heart of the ecumenical movement is the concern for the unity of the church.”¹ Today, as in the past, the search for unity in the body of Christ is remarkable. However, one of the main obstacles we are experiencing in the modern ecumenical movement today is lack of attitude of learning from one another. The main challenge is the intriguing, persistent, and most perplexing trend of rigidity in church traditions. The significance is how to develop ecumenical strategy to make dialogue, ecumenical recognition and reception very effective in the twenty-first century.

The theology of receptive ecumenism has come to be a subject for study and discussion in ecumenical platforms. This constitutes the major topic of discussion in the ARCIC III documents.² The objective of this paper is to stimulate the consciousness of church traditions and ecumenical bodies on the positive impact of receptive ecumenism. It will look at how receptive ecumenism is generating new way of doing ecumenism which may arouse the consciousness of those involved in ecumenical dialogue, so that difficulties and tensions in ecumenical dialogue may lessens or possibly cease entirely; and thereby achieve the prayer of Christ “That all may be one...” (John 17: 21).

Receptive Ecumenism as a New Strategy in Christian Ecumenism

Receptive ecumenism is a new strategy proposed to promote the search for church unity in the contemporary times. It is coming up with a self-critical question, which church traditions in bilateral and/or multilateral dialogue should ask themselves in order to initiative result oriented in ecumenical dialogue. Receptive ecumenism ask the question: What can a church tradition learn from another, which will promote the unity of the Christian Church? Receptive ecumenism encourages church traditions to reflect on their ecumenical relationship with the other church tradition by asking this question: What do I need to learn, with integrity, from the other church tradition?

Durham University and Paul Murray came up with this terminology “receptive ecumenism” to chat a new cause or wave in contemporary ecumenism. He proposed the receptive ecumenism strategy to promote the on-going Christian ecumenism across the nations and Church traditions. Murray is a Roman Catholic Church lay theologian and a Professor of Systematic Theology in the Department of

Theology and Religion at Durham University, UK.³ He has served as the Dean and Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies, as well as the President of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.⁴ He is a Holy See appointed consultant to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and a member of the third phase of work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission.⁵

In collaboration with theologians and ecumenists, from across the Christian traditions and from academic and ecclesial contexts, the Centre for Catholic Studies within the Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University has been hosting a series of research projects devoted to developing and modelling a fresh new strategy in Christian ecumenism, referred to as Receptive Ecumenism.⁶ Murray has labored to see receptive ecumenism taken shape around four international conferences. He has made many presentations in conferences and has equally written a good number of journal articles and books on receptive ecumenism. Currently, Murray is doing a project which he provisionally entitled: *Catholic Transfigured: Conceiving Change in the Church*. As he said, “this current interest in ecclesiology, ecclesial practice, and the dynamics of ecclesial development is also reflected in my MA module on *Conceiving Change in Contemporary Catholicism*, which contributes to the specialised pathway in Catholic Studies...”⁷

Receptive ecumenism has been gaining awareness and acceptance through the Receptive Ecumenism International Conferences coordinated by Durham University, England. Until date, receptive ecumenism has taken shape around four international conferences. This conference gathers theologians, ecumenists, and ecclesiastical hierarchies together in a round table to look at the possibilities and potency of receptive ecumenism. The conference on receptive ecumenism provides a professional platform for strategic discussion, planning and identifying main areas for potentially fruitful receptive learning from the other.

The first international conference on receptive ecumenism took place at Ushaw College, Durham, UK, in January 2006.⁸ The central theme was “*Receptive Ecumenism and the Call*”

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Rev. Canon Nelson Iluno is an Anglican Priest from the Diocese of Nnewi, Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). He is currently the director of Ecumenism in the Diocese of Nnewi. He was a lecturer for ten years at the post ordination clergy training school, St. Andrew's Diocesan Church Centre, Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria. He holds postgraduate degrees in Theology and Church History from Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Abeokuta, Nigeria. He has authored many books and articles, including latest title: Spiritual Formation.

to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism.”⁹ In January 11 to 15, 2009, the second Receptive Ecumenism International Conference took place in the same University, with the theme: “*Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to Be Church Together.*”¹⁰ The year 2009 conference brought together about 150 participants¹¹ from across the traditions in order to explore a fresh way of conceiving the ecumenical task fitted for the contemporary ecumenical situation.

The third Receptive Ecumenism International Conference took place at Fairfield University, Connecticut, from June 9 to 12, 2014,¹² on the theme “*Receptive Ecumenism in International Perspective: Contextual Ecclesial Learning.*”¹³ About 125 theologians and ecumenists from around the world attended this conference.¹⁴ This followed by the fourth international conference on Receptive Ecumenism on “*Discernment, Decision-Making and Reception.*”¹⁵ The fourth took place in November 6 to 9, 2017, at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia. Previous conferences assembled experts in the contemporary ecumenism from across various church traditions and from significant ecumenical bodies such as the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.¹⁶ In the light of some significant consultations during and after the conferences with experts primarily involved in contemporary ecumenism it became clear that there was need for a sustainable research project to facilitate the potentially fruitful receptive ecumenism in both global and local levels.

The first and second conferences held in Durham led to the establishment of the research project. In the Northeast of England, nine Christian denominational groupings are involved in the regional comparative research project in Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church. This regional comparative research project will explore, probe and test the potency of receptive ecumenism strategy on these selected denominational groupings. The churches which are willing to submit their church life data to scrutiny include the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Hexham and Newcastle, the Anglican Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle, the Methodist Districts of Darlington and Newcastle and the Northern Synod of the United Reformed Church.¹⁷

Durham University in collaboration with other institutions in Australia, Europe, and North America constituted three research teams embarked respectively on Governance and Finance, Ministry and Leadership, and Learning and Formation. This project, which involves a multi-disciplinary team of theologians, ecclesialologists, ecumenists and other experts, as planned, would run for four or more years. The purpose of the project, according to Kelly, “is to gather data and analyse it so that all the participants might learn something about how the difficulties they experience in their

own cultures and practices might be fruitfully addressed by learning from each other, and receiving examples of ‘best practice’ from each other.”¹⁸

The task expressed in this project has been inspiring all the members to take an active part in it. Murray was of the opinion that this research project would “examine how respective difficulties and sticking points in the organizational cultures, structures, and processes of each of the participant church traditions, from regional to congregational levels, might fruitfully be addressed by learning from, or receiving, examples of ‘best practice’ in the other traditions.”¹⁹ The research project gave too much emphasis to academic research; however, it is still viable and relevant but the most difficult. The project will explore patiently the reasons for good and effective ecclesiological instruments and culture, which works in the other tradition. The project is a reassessment of the ecumenical process, in light of the challenges and difficulties faced by ecumenists. The project will examine a way forward in achieving the goals of the contemporary ecumenism. “Receptive ecumenism suggests that a better way forward is to more honestly acknowledge the diversity that exists within the Christian community.”²⁰

Church Traditions Appropriating Receptive Ecumenism

There is a way forward today in the search of Church unity. Instead of focusing on areas of potential convergence between the churches, proponents of receptive ecumenism say that ecumenism at the present needs to focus on the individual growth and learning of each church tradition in dialogue with others.²¹ There is no doubt that receptive ecumenism is a new strategy or method. “In the recent years, a shift in the understanding of ecumenism and in methodology has taken place. Receptive Ecumenism emerged in Catholic circles as one of these new methodologies.”²² It is in tandem with the respective teachings of Pope John Paul II and His Holiness, Pope Francis. Receptive ecumenism resonates strongly with Pope Francis’s request of church leaders and theologians across traditions to go forward in this path so that the scandal of disunity in the body of Christ will no longer be with us. Speaking during the 2014 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Pope Francis said:

It is good to acknowledge the grace with which God blesses us and, even more so, to find in other Christians something of which we are in need, something that we can receive as a gift from our brothers and our sisters. The Canadian group that prepared the prayers for this Week of Prayer has not invited the communities to think about what they can give their Christian neighbours, but has exhorted them to meet to understand what all can receive from time to time from the others. This requires something more. It requires much prayers, humility, reflection and constant conversion. Let us go forward on

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this path, praying for the unity of Christians, so that this scandal may cease and be no longer with us.²³

Delivering a sermon at Westminster Abbey, in 2016 during the fifty years anniversary celebration of the Anglican Centre in Rome, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Most Rev. Justin Welby said: “The habits of the centuries render us comfortable with disunity... I pray that ARCIC disrupts our disunity... it must develop its especial genius of a spirit of receptive ecumenism: of asking not what we might give the other, but what we lack that God might give us through the other.”²⁴ In some circles, this strategy has been very positively received. The strategy is working in Roman Catholic relations with Anglicans and Methodists.²⁵ The methodology has gained recognition in the ecumenical bilateral dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Communion. It is being appropriated in the on-going third phase of the work of Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). ARCIC III recognizes receptive ecumenism as an appropriate method in dealing with contemporary issues in ecumenical dialogue.

ARCIC III appropriated the method of receptive ecumenism in preparing and producing the first agreed statement in the third phase of ARCIC dialogue.²⁶ This document, concluded in 2017 at Erfurt, Germany, was to mark the five hundred years commemoration of the sixteen-century Protestant Reformation.²⁷ Paul Murray is one of the Roman Catholic official representatives in the third phase of the work of ARCIC and his contributions are not in doubt. The statement of ARCIC III discussed extensively the importance of the receptive ecumenism as a strategy for contemporary dialogue in the ecumenical circle.²⁸

Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches are already exploring the strategy of receptive ecumenism through the platform of their bilateral dialogue. The participation of the Methodist Church leadership, scholars and theologians in the Receptive Ecumenism International Conferences is yielding positive result in their dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. Their positive openness made it easy for the receptive ecumenism strategy to be appropriated in their bilateral dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. The World Methodist Council has been participating in all the four previous conferences held in 2006, 2009, 2014 and 2017.

Chapman’s paper on receptive ecumenism in relation to Methodist Roman Catholic dialogue on grace and holiness offered a sample of what receptive ecumenism stands for. He has asserted that the World Methodist Council has embraced the receptive ecumenism as a viable tool for effective dialogue. Chapman, in his report, succinctly remarked that “while this may be new and exciting for some traditions, our World Methodist Council dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church has been following the same method

for the past ten years.”²⁹ The World Methodist Council has benefited from the strategy of receptive ecumenism introduced into their dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, and “the fruits of that dialogue can be seen in the most recent reports.”³⁰ The report of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council was published in 2006, with the title: “The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church.”³¹

Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Receptive Learning

The modern ecumenical movement appropriates dialogue, ecumenical recognition; reconciled diversity, “*koinonia*” and other models or concepts in ecumenism to foster bilateral and multilateral relations; and many of these have yielded good results. It is high time to test receptive ecumenism. As Kelly has said this “is an area of ecumenical engagement that has received a lot of attention in the last couple of years.”³² This is yielding good fruits as traditions are beginning to embrace it. It is positively making the search for church unity to be more robust. This will give new vigor to people’s interest in dialogue. Churches have been in dialogue with one another for decades and the zeal with which some began the dialogue is decreasing because it has not yielded fruit as expected. Some ecumenical dialogues are very slow, static or discouraging because of what is coming out of it. Academic scholarship led to the development of this strategy to fire up the zeal of the people who are committed to the cause of ecumenism. Organizations, institutions and commissions that embrace this strategy would likely regain strength in their pursuit.

Looking at an agreed statement of ARCIC III, made in Erfurt 2017, “receptive learning is that process whereby each of our traditions asks itself whether instruments of communion and other elements of church life found in the other tradition might suggest a way of furthering the mission of the church in one’s own tradition.”³³ ARCIC and Murray are moving in the same direction. Both terms: “receptive ecumenism” and “receptive learning” are found in Murray’s writings.³⁴ Since there are clear evidences that the contemporary ecumenical journey is becoming difficult, especially in some points of discussion in bilateral dialogues,³⁵ ARCIC adopted Murray’s strategy of receptive ecumenism in their bilateral dialogue in order to move forward as they are walking together on the way and learning to be the church at all levels. Although, the term instruments of communion has roots in particular Anglican usage, the ARCIC has adopted the term with broader reference to both traditions.³⁶ The instruments of communion is a means of probing and testing the strategy of receptive ecumenism and identifying key areas for potentially fruitful receptive learning from the other.³⁷

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ARCIC III notes that such “transformative receptive learning from the other tradition requires frank assessment, repentance, and the courage to look at ourselves honestly and learn from the other.”³⁸ There is the understanding and hope that receptive ecumenical learning would certainly yield significant result in the nearest time. If receptive ecumenism will yield result, there will be a careful exploration, studies, learning, and findings deriving from the earlier dialogues. This method encourages church traditions to approach receptive ecumenism with a positive openness to study and evaluation of what seems to work in another tradition, with a view to adopting it to one’s own.³⁹ It is a way forward for ecclesial learning and identifying suitable elements and cases, especially areas of potential receptive learning from the gifts and strengths of one or more of the other traditions.

“Receptive learning is the way in which ARCIC III has appropriated the approach of receptive ecumenism.”⁴⁰ ARCIC III, calls for extensive and pragmatic coherence in studying and learning those elements, which would advance the mission of the church in one’s own tradition. There is the need to examine and evaluate whether a particular tradition’s ecclesiological self-understanding can be directly borrowed, integrated or expanded. ARICI III is of the opinion that “receptive learning does not presume that elements from one tradition can usually be directly borrowed from the other.”⁴¹ ARCIC III argues, “One tradition might decide that, in some cases, some processes or instruments in another tradition would not be suitable.”⁴² Both ideas, receptive ecumenism and receptive learning, encourages church traditions to learn ecclesiological cultures, instruments and structures that are working effectively and efficiently in the other. A tradition may decide to study and adopt any policy or ideology, which promotes Christian unity found in the other. Just as ARCIC III discovered that the “instruments of communion” in the Anglican Communion, “could also be applied to Roman Catholic structures and procedures.”⁴³ Receptive ecumenism has made it possible for “Anglicans and Catholics (to) recognize the need for instruments of communion that serve the sustaining and furtherance of such communion.”⁴⁴ From ARCIC III documents, it could be said that indeed, Anglicans and Roman Catholics are already enriching each by drawing on the gifts and experience that they see in each other traditions.⁴⁵

Learning and receiving those things, which have helped the other tradition to relate well in the ecumenical platform with others is the target of receptive ecumenism. With humility and openness, a tradition could find an interesting sound theology and accurate doctrine in the other. Genuine spirituality or models of spiritual formation could be recognized in the other. Leadership, administrative and financial structures differs in church traditions. A tradition that is

experiencing crisis in a given area may decide in good faith to embark on a search for a better qualities or structures in order to improve and perform effectively and efficiently.

There are elements of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in different church traditions. Receptive ecumenism encourages traditions to recognize and receive the elements of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church found in the other. Receptive ecumenism offers opportunities for ecclesial renewal and receptive ecumenical learning in the areas of liturgy and sacraments: baptism, Eucharist, and ministry. The essential principle behind Receptive Ecumenism is that the primary ecumenical responsibility is to ask not “What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?” but “What do we need to learn from them?” The assumption is that if all were asking this question seriously and acting upon it then all would be moving in ways that would both deepen our authentic respective identities and draw us into relationship that is more intimate.⁴⁶

It is through the model of ecumenical dialogue that the platform for ecclesial learning and reception could take better shape. In addition, a tradition can learn from the other by taking time to analyse and discuss important agreed documents. Some of the bilateral and multilateral documents to analyse and discuss include agreed statements or common declarations between church traditions, such as statements of ARCIC (I, II, III), the Porvoo Agreement, Leuenberg Agreement, Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church (JDDJ), and others not mentioned. The unity statements of the World Council of Churches are relevant in discussing receptive ecumenism. “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” (BEM), and “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” (TCTCV), documents of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches are rich materials for ecclesial learning and recognition.

Theological institutions are very important in the search for church unity. Church leaders are prepared through the platform of theological training. Some institutions accommodate students from various church traditions, while some institutions are owned jointly by more than one church tradition. This could be a means of studying other traditions. Through, common worship and traditional exchange of pulpit, a tradition may find something good to learn from the other. Actually, receptive learning is already taking place gradually. There are indications that receptive ecumenism are receiving positive outcomes. For instance, there is a growing interest and reception of the insights of BEM document of the World Council of Churches as a central and vital ecumenical work. Many, traditions have taken up the question of episcopacy as something they need to consider, and some have raised the possibility of introducing the

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threefold order of the ordained ministry. Some churches that do not practice immersion baptism have begun to study this practice more intently and to ask whether they might adopt such a practice.⁴⁷

There is a critical question, which some people are beginning to raise on the limit of receptive ecumenism. According to ARCIC III, “the question remains to what extent these instruments of communion need to be both affective... and effective?”⁴⁸ Others put the question in this way: To what extent can a tradition learn or appropriate what seems to be suitable and working in the other tradition, or should a tradition have to forfeit some of structures in order to appropriate what is being learned from the other tradition? The aim of receptive ecumenism is not to lead a tradition to dissolve or forfeit existing ecclesiological structures. The aim is to find a reasonable means of receiving and internalizing reception processes and effectively carrying out the agreed statements and common declarations made through dialogues.

There is no limit to what a tradition could learn from the other. Receptive ecumenism requires that the need and ways for learning be received with dynamic integrity. Ladislav Orsy had rightly observed “receptive ecumenism among Christian churches is a delicate operation: it is authentic when it is marked by truth and transfused by prudence.”⁴⁹ Each tradition should bring prudent judgment, honesty and positive openness to ecclesial learning and evaluation on what seems to work in another church tradition. Even though, they are in the forefront of ecumenical pursuit today, Roman Catholic Church believes that “such decisions could only be taken at the universal level, so that they would have direct implications for all Roman Catholic churches and Eastern Catholic churches throughout the world.”⁵⁰ Traditions should remove fear, the attitude of superiority or inferiority, and varying obstacles, which have been jeopardizing the need to learn good things from the other. There is an increasing conviction that what we may have to learn from the dialogue partner or pilgrim companion would promote unity.

Conclusion

This study has x-rayed one aspect of pragmatic or positive response to the difficulties and tensions within the various ecumenical dialogues in the modern ecumenical movement, which is receptive ecumenism. Receptive ecumenism has come to provide a new strategy to do ecumenism. It can sustain the contemporary ecumenism. Through this strategy, churches will find in other such precious gift of God. This study has been predicated on an explicit understanding that genuine receptive ecumenism is a means for churches to learn, to grow and to invigorate the ecumenical movement, because there is something for us to learn from one another.

This will help traditions focus on their identity, but not in a narrow or rigid way that is not open to genuine self-evaluation. Receptive ecumenism requires traditions to be open to conversion and renewal. Change is never easy. One thing is certain, receptive ecumenism will facilitate genuine ecclesial learning in every tradition. It is upright and recommendable to pursue the search for church unity with a new energy that has come to be domicile in receptive ecumenism. In some circles, the receptive ecumenism strategy has been very positively received. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) endorsed it as a valuable help in the third phase of their work. Everyone should move forward on this path with confidence, praying and hoping for a positive impact. No matter the enormity of the odds against models of dialogue in the modern ecumenical movement, receptive ecumenism comes forward to hold up a ray of hope and a beacon of light. 

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a natural setting for such a venture. (As some of you might know, the population of Trinidad is very cosmopolitan with there being as many Hindus as Roman Catholics – the latter being the largest Christian denomination). The Monastery has also hosted significant international religious personages, including the Dalai Lama.

Finally, I want to refer to a statement that Archbishop Donald Reece – a President of the CCC – made in a letter to Abbot John Pereira on the occasion of the launch of the Centre. I find it both poetic and profoundly theological. Commenting on the suitability of the venture to the official name of the Monastery, Archbishop Reece writes: "How appropriate the term 'exile,' seeing that we are on the march towards the unity envisioned by Jesus; until we reach that point of unity, we are in 'exile.'"

Having shared this venture of the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC), I want to reiterate the point that there are any number of initiatives that can be undertaken with a view creating "spaces of hospitality." It doesn't have to be anything grandiose. "Small is beautiful"! What is most important to bear in mind is that, just as we recognized the Blessed Trinity as the ultimate ground of Ecumenism, so too *the Trinity is the ultimate space of hospitality*. While being within itself an ongoing eternal exchange of Love and mutual embrace of the three distinct Divine Persons, the Trinity invites us – in Christ, the eternal Word – to share in its very own life, the "fullness of life." This is symbolized so very well in the icon of the Trinity by Rublev that we referred to earlier. For those of us who are familiar with the icon,

"Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to Be Church Together," *Ecclesiological Investigations: Scholarship for the Church of churches* Accessed December 29, 2018, <http://ei-research.net/01-2009-receptive-ecumenism-and-ecclesial-learning-learning-to-be-church-together/>

Sinn, Simone. "The Search for Church Unity and the Unity of Humanity and Creation," CAS-CC-MAS Module on Ecumenical Theology, Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Academic Year 2018-19 (Unpublished Module Paper).

The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church, Report of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, eight series. North Carolina: The World Methodist Council, 2006.

"Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church-Local, Regional, Universal," An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III), Erfurt 2017, (ARCIC III, Paragraph 18), 6, accessed December 28, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20180521_walking-together-ontheway_en.pdf

we would observe that there is an empty space at the table around which the three Persons are seated. That is the space into which we are invited – *the "space of hospitality"!*

With the practice of Hospitality, then, and the vulnerability and pain which inevitably comes with, we can say that we have embraced a "*spirituality of ecumenism*," accompanying one another as we endeavor to *move from hostility to hospitality*.

As we draw to a close, I would like to recognize both the sustained efforts and challenges of those (of us) who have worked so hard and in such a dedicated manner in the cause of Ecumenism. There is no hiding from the fact that, in many parts of the world, we are lamentably in what I call an "Ecumenical Recession." Apart from being unappreciated, the task seems like that of the Greek mythological figure "Sisyphus" – a never-ending, (seemingly) non-productive, sometimes humiliating, repetitive drudgery. In this regard, it is interesting – if not encouraging – to read the words of David Thompson, Emeritus Professor of Modern Church History at Cambridge University.

In the foreword of a book entitled *No Turning Back – the Future of Ecumenism*, published in honor of the late Canadian R.C. Ecumenist, Dr. Margaret O'Gara, Thompson says the following: "All ecumenists know that they may not live to see the fruit of their labours, and in any case the unity of the Church is not primarily a matter of human achievement. (Still sometimes the latter point becomes an excuse of inaction. Might this not be to take the name of the Holy

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In Memoriam

Harding Meyer (1928 – 2018)

By André Birmelé

The worldwide ecumenical movement lost in Harding Meyer's death on the first of December 2018 one of its most important figures. Meyer was an ecumenical visionary and a pioneer. Many of the developments in global bilateral relationships can be traced back to him. We have much to thank him for.

Originally, however, Meyer had no particular interest in ecumenism. In 1958 he took a post as docent at the Lutheran theological faculty in San Leopoldo, Brazil. As a good Lutheran theologian, he was principally interested in the truth. In those days, before the Second Vatican Council, he met and spoke with representatives of the locally very strong Catholic church, through which Meyer gradually became convinced that concern for the truth could not be divorced from the question of the unity of the church. When, in 1966, he was called to the role of Secretary for Ecumenical Questions at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Geneva, he was able to bring this conviction to the global level. The first international dialogue in which he participated was the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, which began in 1967. He took part in this dialogue for twenty-five years.

In 1971 Meyer moved to the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. The LWF had founded the Institute at its assembly in Helsinki in 1963 to accompany Lutherans' global dialogues with other Christian churches. At the outset the Institute had multiple difficulties so it fell to Meyer to give it the necessary direction and drive to do its work. His focal points were equally conducting dialogue and intensive investigation of the Lutheran heritage, on the principle that it is only dialogue partners who fully know their own identity can successfully engage in a dialogue that is not satisfied with compromises but always looks to the ultimate goal of the unity of the church throughout the world.

Due to his already vast experience, Meyer dreamed of an Institute where Lutheran scholars from many different countries around the world in all their diversity would work together. Thus these representatives, while each working on the global level to converse with a specific Christian family, would also need to keep their attention focused on their local contexts. This was bound up with travel to give lectures and courses in locations all over the world. Meyer developed this dream and contributed to the Institute's international recognition which it continues to enjoy to this day. Specific theologies and church institutions as seen individually in countries were too narrow a scope for him. He was convinced that there was not just one way to be church, and the Institute should not speak as if there was. For this reason

he insisted that the directorship of the Institute would rotate among the staff every two years. This was an important structural principle to keep the Institute open to voices from around the world without the post turning into a matter of bureaucratic administration. Meyer himself took on this two-year post a number of times, but he was equally happy when a colleague from Eritrea, Indonesia, Finland, or the US held it. So he enacted within the Institute's structure his fundamental conviction: unity in diversity! Not only dialogue with other churches, but first of all dialogue within Lutheranism.

The many activities that Meyer took part in, his numerous publications, and the impetus he gave to others are so many and so wide-reaching that it is not possible to enumerate them in detail. But two in particular have had such great significance that they are worth saying a few words more about.

As mentioned above, Meyer took part in the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue from the beginning. He was the Lutheran expert. Already in its first report (1972) the dialogue achieved a wide-reaching consensus on the understanding of salvation. This was further verified in the understanding of the Lord's Supper (1978). There it was asserted that a basic consensus existed on the doctrine of the Eucharist, and only the question of the office of ministry remained an obstacle. Accordingly, the dialogue then turned to the ministry. It was acknowledged in the 1981 report that in this domain there remained unresolved questions.

Meyer was of the opinion that only an official statement at the highest ecclesiastical levels would lead to the widespread reception of these dialogue results. His first attempt, under the title "Facing Unity," was however rejected. In response, he took up a suggestion originating in the US to

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Prof. Dr. André Birmelé is a Pastor in the Lutheran Church of Alsace-Lorraine. His association with the Institute dates back to 1974, when he became a research assistant to the staff. His wide-ranging ecumenical work has led him to participation in both international and European Lutheran-Reformed dialogue leading to the Leuenberg Fellowship (now the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe), the European Lutheran-Reformed-Anglican dialogue leading to the Reuilly Agreement, and Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, both European and French. As of September 2014 he is a Professor Emeritus of the University of Strasbourg and continues to work at the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, France.

Meyer was of the opinion that only an official statement at the highest ecclesiastical levels would lead to the widespread reception of these dialogue results.

work on a “Declaration” that would express the basic consensus on the understanding of salvation and how the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century could be lifted between the two churches today. The outcome was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), which was signed in 1999 by the Vatican and the churches of the LWF. This declaration is of the highest significance, since it is to date the one and only declaration that the Roman church has signed with a church of the Reformation. Meyer himself wrote the first draft of the JDDJ. He initiated the whole process. This first draft was thoroughly edited, and the project was carried on after Meyer’s retirement by others, mainly his successor, Theodor Dieter. Nevertheless, Meyer accompanied the entire process, even from a distance, from beginning to end. His personal contacts also played a critical role in the process, for instance his good relationship with Cardinal Lehmann and, not least of all, with Pope John Paul II, who received him in private audiences. The JDDJ is an important result of recent ecumenical efforts. It in large part can be traced back to the preliminary work by Meyer.

The second momentous contribution that Meyer made that should be mentioned here concerns methodology. When scholars enter into dialogue, they are charting new territory. They must address not just the topic itself but the goal of the conversation and the ways to get there. Much that is taken for granted today here also can be traced back to Meyer’s innovative work. In particular he formulated two principles that are used throughout the world today, even by people who have no idea who authored them.

The first principle concerns models of unity. Meyer advocated for “unity in reconciled diversity.” Unity as uniformity was a totally foreign concept for him. Diversity is essential for church life. The problem lies in the divisive character of certain differences. This divisive character is specifically what must be overcome. That is the goal of the dialogues. Dialogue therefore reaches its goal when differences have been reconciled, which is to say that they are seen as legitimate expressions of the same gospel. A prime example of this is the four Gospels in the holy Scripture. They are different, have different emphases, and nevertheless they agree in the essentials.

In this same way, Meyer argued, the various Christian

families should seek to be reconciled to one another without sacrificing their own distinctive identities. This vision was not that of the World Council of Churches, and there were some very tense conversations between the Institute in Strasbourg and Lukas Vischer, the leader of the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission. Meyer’s approach eventually won the day, as is witnessed not only by the JDDJ but by many other ecumenical developments as well.

The second principle that can be traced back to Meyer and has since been adopted worldwide is “differentiated consensus.” It is closely connected to “unity in reconciled diversity.” If unity is not uniformity, then so also must any consensus that would lead to unity cannot contradict the principle of “reconciled diversity.” Therefore consensus must not merely tolerate remaining legitimate differences in silence but expressly name and claim them as reconciled and therefore not divisive differences. In this way, consensus itself must be differentiated.

Here again the best example is the JDDJ. It makes clear that a consensus in the doctrine of justification exists and that the same fundamental truths can be said by the respective partners in different ways. However, since the notion of “differentiated consensus” has been misunderstood in many ways leading to different valuations of consensus as more or less full consensus, it is better now to speak of “differentiating consensus.” This in any event better expresses what Meyer intended and what today many bilateral dialogues confirm.

It is an interesting fact that even civil society has adopted these principles. The former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, visited Meyer in Strasbourg in order to better understand his approach. Thus this way of engaging in dialogue takes place today not only in Strasbourg, but also in Brussels.

Deeply rooted in the Christian faith and faithful to his Lutheran heritage, Harding Meyer always strove for the unity of the church. But for him it was much like elderly Moses at the edge of the promised land. Meyer saw the unity of the church from afar but it was not given to him to enter into it. But he did much to set the churches on the right course and direct them. All of us, his colleagues and successors, are indebted to his approaches to ecumenism and are eager to continue along the road he first explored.

Harding Meyer died in the night of the first Sunday of Advent. A candle is lit and we are on the way to meet the Lord. Meyer has already arrived there. He sees now fully what we see only in part.

Thank you, Harding! 

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Spirit in vain?)” [My parenthesis]

Apart from Professor Thompson’s words, we have the very words of Scripture to give us support. In fact Professor Thompson’s words remind us very much of chapter eleven of the Letter to the Hebrews. After making his point about *Faith* being the “conviction of things not seen,” the author goes on to name a number of prominent figures from the Old Testament as exemplars of Faith – Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, *et al.* Then comes the punch-line. The author then says: “All these died in Faith, before receiving any of the things that had been promised, but they saw them coming in the distance and welcomed them.” (Heb. 11:13) Quite a sobering thought!

While reminding us in 2 Cor. 4:7 that “we are only earthenware vessels that hold this treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us,” in Romans 15:4, Paul also reminds us of “the examples scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God.” He then goes on – in verse 5 – to pray: “and may He who helps us when we refuse to give up, help you all to be tolerant with one another, following the example of Christ Jesus, so that united in mind and voice you may give glory to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In this whole matter of a spirituality of ecumenism, there

is a salient feature, again highlighted by Paul, which could be justifiably deemed the “zenith” of such a spirituality. This has to do with *how* we embrace and bear the suffering that is the consequence of the vulnerability of which we spoke and other challenges. Like Paul, we are called to *bear* – some traditions might say, “offer up” – *these sufferings for the building up of the Body of Christ – the Church*. Paul puts it like this: “It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his Body, the Church.” (Col.1:24; cf Philip. 3:10 & 2 Cor. 4:10) An amazing statement!

So, in closing, it is good to hear the words of Jesus himself when he says to us: “There is no need to be afraid, little flock.” (Lk. 12:32). And again: “When you have done all that you have been told to do, say: “we are merely servants: we have done no more than our duty.” (Lk. 17:10)

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, AMEN! 

This address was delivered at the Graymoor Friary at the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement in Garrison, NY in celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU), 2019.