

Gdynia Lecture No. 4

Common Principles

When we start to meet each other across the denominational and ideological boundaries, and even more when we pray with each other, we begin to discover what we really have in common and where we are different.¹ This experience reveals to us more clearly a very important principle: **What unites divided Christians is more fundamental than what divides them/us.** I should make clear that I am only referring here to Christians who believe in the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, and in his saving death and resurrection.

What unites divided Christians is more greater than what divides them/us. This statement was made by Pope John XXIII and cited with approval by John Paul II (*Ut Unum Sint*, para. 20). The deepest ground for this statement is that what unites us **as Christians** is the work of the Holy Spirit of God, which cannot simply be said for the reasons that divide us. For example, the teaching of the New Testament is clear on three fundamental Christian affirmations that they are only possible in and through the Holy Spirit:

1. Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12: 3);
2. God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is our Abba (Rom. 8: 15; Gal. 4: 6): “the Spirit cries out Abba, Father”.
3. Come, Lord Jesus: “the Spirit and the Bride say Come” (Rev. 22: 17, 20).

Our conviction on these fundamental affirmations of faith comes from the Holy Spirit. This is not necessarily true of all Christian dogmatic formulations concerning the Incarnation, redemption and the Trinity, though we are far closer on all of these than on statements concerning the Church and the means of salvation. I should explain that the Catholic Church believes that the doctrinal declarations in the ancient Creeds are infallible and free from error. This is less than saying that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit in the way we believe about the Holy Scriptures. Infallible and free from error means that the Holy Spirit protected the authors from proclaiming what is not true. Inspired by the Holy Spirit means that what was written was what the Holy Spirit wanted written. It is saying that with the Scriptures there is a divine author and a human author.

This affirmation coming from John XXIII is also based on the recognition that some Christian doctrines are more central than others: this is not saying that they are more true than others. This point concerns the place of particular doctrines in the presentation and in the acceptance of faith in Jesus Christ, the One whom God has sent (John 6: 29). It is no coincidence that this teaching on “the hierarchy of truths” was first clearly spelled out in the first official Catholic document commending the movement towards Christian unity. “When comparing doctrines with one another, they [Catholic theologians] should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths,

¹ “Prayer, the community at prayer, enables us always to discover anew the evangelical truth of the words: ‘You have one Father’ (Matt. 23: 9), the Father – Abba – invoked by Christ himself, the only-begotten and consubstantial Son. And again: ‘You have one teacher, and you are all brethren.’ (Matt. 23: 8). ‘Ecumenical’ prayer discloses this fundamental dimension of brotherhood in Christ, who died to gather together the children of God who were scattered ...” (John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, para. 26).

since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.”²

Notice that these Catholic documents do not speak of primary or secondary truths. It is not good to speak as though there are some doctrines that are really important and others that do not matter that much. If something about God and salvation is true, then it has to have a real value. Maybe it is better to think of core truths, of central realities, from which everything else issues like the spokes of a wheel, except that everything is connected to everything else.

Fundamental Confession concerning Jesus Christ: I find that we are fundamental agreed at the heart of our respective traditions (heritages) on such points as:

- Jesus as the only Son of the heavenly Father (God from God, light from light)
- Jesus as the incarnate Word of God, true man born of the Virgin Mary
- Jesus as the one Saviour, who died for our sins
- Jesus as the one Lord, who rose from the dead and who ascended to the Father
- Jesus as the Lord who will come again in glory
- Jesus as the head of His body, the Church

Experts are seeing more clearly today that there is a fundamental unity of confession concerning Jesus in the main Christian traditions. Divisions occurred over Christology in the 5th century concerning how the union of the divine and the human in Jesus was expressed. As a result the Oriental Orthodox Churches separated (of Egypt and Ethiopia, of Syria and Iraq, of Armenia) from the “great Church”. But in the last twenty-five years through dialogue between these ancient churches of the East and both the Catholic and the Orthodox traditions, it has been shown and acknowledged that the divisions were based on misunderstandings between languages and cultures. The fact that misunderstandings could lead to divisions lasting for over a millennium and a half reminds us that we have to be very careful before pinning Christian orthodoxy to one linguistic formulation.

Conversion. All Christian traditions are agreed that a conversion of life is required by Christian life, that this conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit in us and that this conversion requires a repentance and a turning away from sin. We are not agreed about what counts as an authentic conversion, and we are not agreed about how the Holy Spirit produces this conversion in the life of the Christian. Here again it is not hard to see that the reality of conversion is more fundamental than the questions of means and sequences. This means that we should give most attention to all data and evidence concerning conversion and see that it is more important that conversion occurs than that it happens in accordance with our definitions.

Eschatology. There has been through the centuries a common Christian confession of the future coming of the Lord Jesus in glory which in Scripture is closely associated with the bodily resurrection of the dead. This is the foundational belief that is a direct consequence of the confession of the death

² Decree on Ecumenism, para. 11. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 90: “The mutual connections between dogmas, and their coherence, can be found in the whole of the Revelation of the mystery of Christ.”, which is followed by the citation from UR, 11. The hierarchy of truths is also mentioned in the Catechism, para. 234, that states: “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them.”

and the resurrection of Jesus. Detailed scenarios of the end-times, of how the count-down to the Lord's coming will work out, are secondary. Christians who confess the historic faith are agreed on the fundamental; they disagree on the secondary.

Scripture. The same principle applies to our understanding of the Sacred Scriptures. What is foundational is the shared historic faith that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, that has the Holy Spirit and human writers as authors. Thus, the Scriptures are uniquely life-giving and they form a uniquely authoritative source to which no other theological or spiritual writings can compare. It is much more important to confess together this uniqueness of the Sacred Scriptures than it is to insist on a particular definition of inerrancy.

One of the problems of more narrow definitions is that they are often the product of one language and culture and in some way are a consequence of their distancing from the biblical and Semitic root. This is a particular curse of the English-speaking world, because it has less awareness of other languages.

Worship. All Christians are agreed that worship, both personal and communal, is central to all Christian and church life. We can agree that authentic Christian worship is in "spirit and in truth", that it is directed to the Father and is done in and through Jesus Christ by the power and leading of the Holy Spirit. We disagree about the role and value of liturgy and on the relationship between liturgical prayer and free spontaneous prayer. We disagree about the value of particular forms of worship.

Here again we must learn not to make particular forms more important than the basic reality. In fact, each tradition expresses its understanding of God most fully in the way it worships. The way to overcoming deep prejudices has to include a willingness to take part in the worship of communions whose patterns are very different from our own.