

Lecture No. 5, Gdynia

Where we challenge each other the most

I quite often come across Christians who think that all we have to do to achieve Christian unity is to leave our denominations, to forget all the traditions that have divided, and just to celebrate our basic unity in faith. These believers have often experienced how the Lord breaks down barriers and they have discovered a real element of unity with believers from very different backgrounds. These believers would probably be enthusiastic about all the things that unite us of which I spoke in the last lecture. However, they are unlikely to be enthusiastic about what I will say now.

Yes, we have to begin with what we hold in common. If we don't have that as our starting-point, our relationships will never be on a right basis. But we have to move on from there to understand how to approach the issues that still divide us. The things we share provides the right basis for understanding rightly the things that divide.

The things that still divide us cannot be treated as unimportant. To dismiss them as of no other account is to dishonour the many people who died to defend those convictions. A participant at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 said: "The true path does not lie in treating our differences as unimportant, and impatiently brushing them aside ... but in finding through patient self-discipline a higher point of view which transcends them and in which they are reconciled."¹

I want to suggest now what I believe is a healthy approach to these divisive issues:

- The issues that still divide contain (and because of the divisions and emotive responses in some way hide) riches of divine revelation;
- The healing of these divisions will bring great enrichment and (because of the interconnectedness of everything in God's Plan) throw new light on;
- The points of division can be described as **the agenda of the Holy Spirit for the Church.**

What are the big dividing issues between Catholic and Protestant (esp between Catholics and Evangelicals)?

Another caveat: I don't think we get a very adequate understanding of Catholic – Protestant differences when we ignore the earlier division between Orthodox East and Catholic West. It is significant that the Orthodox tend to see both Catholic and Protestant as typically Western and the Reformation as a quarrel within the Western Church. It is interesting that the three major issues of Mary, Eucharist and

¹ Lord William Gascoyne-Cecil (Anglican).

Pope had already produced significant differences of emphasis between East and West.

What are the big divisive issues?

Means of Grace, i.e. Mediation of Salvation: role of Church, of ministries in the Church (including the pope), sacraments and liturgy, Mary and the Saints.

It has long been recognized that all these issues are inter-connected. It was the famous Protestant theologian Karl Barth who summed up the sin of Catholicism as the idea of human cooperation in the work of God. The Protestant always protests against the Catholic **and**: Jesus and Mary, Jesus and the Church, Scripture and Tradition, Faith and Works. It is in effect a protest against any human mediation except the mediation of Jesus Christ: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2: 5). So as Catholics easily use this word "and", so Protestants have often used the word "sola" or "alone": Jesus alone, Scriptura sola (Scripture alone), Faith alone.

There has been huge progress between Catholics and Protestants on this basic issues of "and" or "alone", but this is with those Protestants who have entered into dialogue and serious discussions with Catholic theologians. Conservative Protestants who have avoided such dialogue have tended just to repeat the old arguments. First, Catholics challenge Protestants to recognize that they too have human mediators, particularly the preachers of the Gospel and evangelists, but then also of pastors. Salvation does not typically just drop from heaven. But of course they hasten to say that they are ministers of the Word, ministering Jesus Christ to the people. To this, the Catholics reply: but that is not so different from what a renewed Catholic faith believes, what was expressed in the decrees of Vatican Two and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. This kind of dialogue helps both sides to identify the real differences and to move us beyond prejudiced stereotypes. It identifies the real issue as being the full subordination of all human mediation within the Church to the unique mediatorship of Jesus, the one Mediator between God and man. This is the real question: what does subordination of all other human mediation of the saving grace of God to the one Mediator really mean and require?

This raises the issue of the role of the Word of God. Scripture expresses the pattern of incarnation: the divine taking on human flesh. Divine authorship expressed by human authors. There is an element of immediacy but it is a mediated immediacy. This question is directly related to continuity and discontinuity. There is a continuity throughout the generations, emphasized in the Catholic tradition, and a discontinuity, emphasized by many Protestants, definitely by Evangelicals and even more by Pentecostals. Continuity expressed by an historical tradition (lit. "handing on"), discontinuity expressed by outpourings of the Holy Spirit direct from heaven. In fact we need both: there is a tradition to be handed down (see Luke 1: 1 - 3; 1 Cor. 15: 3) but this heritage has to be brought alive by the Holy Spirit in each generation.

The tradition of Israel provides the model. The people of Israel are instructed to pass on the teaching

and decisions of Moses and their leaders (see Deut. 6: 6 – 8; 11: 1). But they are constantly sent prophets, who recall the people to the earlier revelation and who carry it further with the messianic prophecies. The written Scriptures are the accredited witness to the origins, the foundation and the promises. The Church has to carry and preach the heritage, but the Church has to be constantly called back to it by prophetic voices.

Catholic renewal means return to the sources. So Vatican Two called for this return to the sources, to the Word of God and the apostolic heritage. There had been in fact been a Catholic neglect of the Scriptures, accentuated by the Protestant focus on the Word of God. But in the Catholic renewal of the 20th century, the return to the biblical roots has been central (biblical studies, liturgical studies and renewal, theological renewal). This is the key factor in any ecumenical breakthrough. The Church is the guardian of the Word and is “under the Word”. The Catholic tradition has emphasized the guardian role and the Protestants the authority of the Word. But at Vatican Two, the decree on Divine Revelation states: “this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant” (para. 10; “Therefore, all clerics, particularly priests of Christ and others who are officially engaged in the ministry of the Word, should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by constant sacred reading and diligent study.” (para. 25). We have not reached that point and what it means for the Magisterium to be under the Word needs further study and clarification.

Church and Individual Believer: Church as Body of Christ, as spiritual reality versus Church as historical institution; communal versus individual; the charismatic and the ordered, liturgy versus spontaneous worship. Focus on Church (Catholic), focus on personal faith (Protestant). We can sum the contrast up in this way: Protestants tend to start from the individual, from individual conversion and then move to the issue of Church. Catholics tend to start from the corporate, from the Church, and then move to the role and the faith of the individual.

These differences are also related to the mediation issue already discussed. But they come at it from a different angle, which can be very helpful. By focusing on the difference between the communal and the individual, it is easier to see how in many respects our approaches are complementary rather than simply opposed. So, for example, many Protestants including Evangelical preachers today are strongly critical of the excessive individualism that affects Western society, especially in North America. They see that a merely individualistic faith (me and Jesus) has no impact on society, and that modern Western society is falling apart. Many examples: evangelizing cities (Dawson: *Taking Your City for God*), transforming society and cultures (Transformation magazine), church planting and building. At the same time, Catholic renewal currents are emphasizing the need for personal conversion and personal faith, adding that societies and cultures cannot be transformed without the transformation of individuals.

The important lesson from John Paul II: JP2 made a massive contribution to the renewal of the Catholic Church. As a young priest in Communist Poland, with memories of Nazi oppression, he saw that the Churches did not have an adequate response to the challenge of atheistic Marxism. He saw that there was a need for a philosophy of man developed from Christian faith that would give a convincing

answer to the Marxist challenge. The Marxist philosophy addressed the future of society and provided a vision: but it completely subordinated the person to society, to the collective. He saw that the inherited Catholic philosophies which focused on concepts like nature, essences and laws were not adequate, because they did not make the uniqueness of the human person central. So he began to develop a philosophy focused on the human person and the dignity of each person, but not in an individualistic way. So in JP2's personalist philosophy, each human person is unique but is necessarily and unavoidably person in society. Family and society are not add-ons, but essential to what it is to be human. In this teaching, the revelation of Jesus Christ is the revelation of God's vision of man and his vision for human society. This personalism avoids the individualism of existentialist philosophy and the collectivism of Marxism. This philosophy is now driving forward Catholic thinking on conversion, on personal transformation, on family and society. It is a decisive contribution to the overcoming of the opposition between the individual and the corporate.

The rise of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements has focused attention on the role of the charisms and of the charismatic unpredictable dimension in the life of the body of Christ. The focus of the Catholic Church after the Reformation was on the reform of abuses and on defending Catholic teaching from Protestant attacks. This led to a major focus on the Church as institution. It was only in the 20th century that there has been a decisive shift away from the focus on institution and a new focus on the Church as the Body of Christ. That represented a shift of focus from the structures to the spiritual life. Now the PC movements (& other factors) have helped to focus attention on the role of the charismatic and the unexpected. Now there is increasing recognition that the Church is necessarily both institutional and charismatic. When Catholic speakers began to give a role to the charismatic dimension, they typically emphasized that the charismatic dimension has to be under authority, i.e. in some way the charismatic is subordinated to the institutional or structural. So I was very encouraged to hear some years ago (Brighton 1991?), Father Raniero Cantalamessa speak of the charismatic and the institutional, but saying that the charismatic came first. The choice of the twelve by Jesus was a charismatic action following all-night prayer, not an institutional decision. But then the structures have to serve the new life, and to serve/facilitate/encourage the charismatic. In 1998 John Paul II gathered all the new movements in the Catholic Church in Rome at Pentecost. He gave an important address in which he said: "The Spirit is always awesome whenever he intervenes. He arouses astonishing new events, he radically changes people and history. This was the unforgetting experience of the Second Vatican Council, during which, guided by the same Spirit, the Church rediscovered the charismatic dimension as being essential to her identity. ...The institutional and charismatic aspects are almost co-essential to the configuration of the Church, and they cooperate, although in different ways, towards its life, its renewal, and the sanctification of the People of God. It is from this providential rediscovery of the Church's charismatic dimension that before and after the Council there has been a remarkable development of ecclesial movements and new communities."