Chapter Seventeen

The Holy Spirit and the Unity of the Body

2. How can Full Unity be Promoted and become a Reality?

The Position from which We Start

Before Vatican Two, the general Catholic approach was that Protestants can be saved through their sincere faith in Christ but despite their church affiliation. At Vatican Two it was recognized for the first time that the Holy Spirit is working in Protestant communions and that their members receive the grace of God through participation in their church. The common ground is located in baptism, which is validly conferred by all churches baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Since that time, the Catholic documents speak of separated Christians being in a state of “imperfect communion”. That means that there is already a degree of communion between us, but it is imperfect. So in this framework work for unity involves working for the imperfect communion to become full communion.

Another corollary of this change is that since Vatican Two, the other Christian bodies and their members are within (though imperfectly within) the one body of Christ. They are no longer simply outside. Protestant Christians are thus within the mystery of the Church. This is why today when Protestant Christians join the Catholic Church, the liturgy speaks not of joining the Church, but of admission to full communion. However, you will be aware that popular understanding and terminology are still mostly stuck in the “inside – outside” way of thinking.

These remarks concern the present position of the Catholic Church. How does this affect the Protestants among us? First, it is good that the Protestants know what the real position of the Catholic Church is. Second, the language of imperfect and full communion can also be applicable to relationships between Protestants, where full communion is understood to mean a genuinely organic unity in one body.

The Principles for Unity Work

Vatican Two spelled out some principles for ecumenism (Decree on Ecumenism, paras. 6 – 8), and these in effect endorsed the teaching of the French ecumenical pioneer, the Abbé Paul Couturier (1881 – 1953). These principles are summarized in the Catechism, para. 821.

1. Ecumenism is inseparable from renewal. “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling.” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 6). Ecumenism requires a purification in the faith and life of all Christians and Christian churches. “Christ summons the church, as she goes on her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human institution here on earth.” (*ibid.*, para. 6). This statement is highly significant, for it is an official Catholic recognition of the principle *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (the Church always needs to be reformed), a major slogan of the Protestant Reformation rejected by the Catholic Church at that time.
2. “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion.” (UR, para. 7). While para. 6 speaks more of the Churches, para. 7 is speaking more of each Christian. However, conversion and purification are required of all church communions and of all Christians. Para. 7 continues by emphasizing the need of humility in all work for unity. Ecumenism requires a humbling process in each Church and in each Christian, as the divisions of Christian have been caused by arrogance, which has often become greater in the process of religious conflict and self-justification.
3. The process of purification requires a greater conformity to Christ and the Gospel. A renewed Church will become ever more Christocentric and ever more sensitive to the Holy Spirit. A renewed Church will be ever more deeply rooted in the biblical revelation given to Israel and most fully in Jesus Christ. So the Council’s Constitution on Divine Revelation teaches: “all the preaching of the church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by sacred scripture.” (*Dei Verbum*, para. 21).
4. “This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name ‘spiritual ecumenism.’” (UR, para. 8). While the Council spoke of the necessity for theological dialogue to examine more deeply the doctrine of each Church tradition and the roots of doctrinal division, it is clear that unity cannot be brought about by theological dialogue alone. Prayer changes the heart, and will give a desire for the fuller unity that we seek. The history of the last forty years of ecumenical dialogue illustrates this truth. For while great progress has been made by theologians, it does not seem to have made much difference to attitudes between Christians and the teaching of the Churches. Why is this? First, the fruits of theological dialogue have not been widely absorbed by other theologians and by church leadership. Second, they have made minimal impact on ordinary churchgoers.

Renewal in Practice

*Being Rooted in Scripture*. Although the presence and contributions of the Orthodox and Protestant observers at Vatican Two had a definite influence on the emerging documents, church teaching since the Council has not been much influenced by ecumenical developments, even though the renewal of biblical studies has already made a big difference. So in the Catholic Church official teaching has become more explicitly Trinitarian and more explicitly Christocentric in the last forty years. The main need now is for biblical scholarship to take full account of the Jewish roots of Christian faith, the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewish character of the New Testament as well as the Old. This is particularly important for the most divisive issues such as Mary, the Eucharist, and apostolic succession. Already we can see the progress made on the issue of the Eucharist as memorial and as sacrifice. Following the Reformation, Protestants typically said it was simply a memorial, and Catholics said it was a sacrifice. The simple memorial view denied the “real presence” and the sacrifice view required it. The two ideas of memorial and sacrifice were often opposed. But the Jewish understanding of memorial is a strong one, so that the Jewish people believe when they celebrate Passover and remember the exodus from Egypt, they are themselves taking part in the exodus. So today it is widely recognized that the Eucharist is both memorial and sacrifice, so that the Catechism teaches: “The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body.” (para. 1362). “Because it is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice.” (para. 1365).

*Becoming More* *Trinitarian and More Christocentric*. A key point made in Vatican Two’s Decree on Ecumenism is that there is a “hierarchy of truths”. Some doctrines are more central than others. So the Council says different doctrinal truths “vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith” (UR, para. 11). Clearly, the Trinity, the Incarnation and Christology, along with Soteriology, that is, teaching about Jesus’s death and resurrection, form the foundation. So a key element in theological and doctrinal renewal is a new subordination of all other teaching and of church practice (e.g. re-Mary and the saints, the sacraments as means of grace, forms of piety and devotion) to the central truths of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one Saviour and Mediator, of the role of the Holy Spirit as giver of life, and the orientation of all through Jesus in the Spirit to the Father.

*The Role of Repentance*. There is only a true change of heart when there is repentance for sin. Often when distortions and imbalances in past Catholic teaching, e.g. in the period before the Reformation and during the great controversies that followed the Reformation, are corrected, there is no recognition that there was sin and infidelity in this history. They can be seen simply as theological adjustments. A major element in the necessary Catholic repentance is a clear confession of the sin of neglecting the Scriptures as the Word of God. The major doctrinal problems arose at a time when Catholic theology was less rooted in the Scriptures than it had been in the time of the Fathers of the Church.

This process of repentance will become easier as we recognize that there is a much greater similarity between the history of the Catholic Church and the history of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament than we have ever realized. It is one of the most authentic signs of God’s mark on Israel that the chosen people had the grace to recognize the many infidelities in their history. So we never find a triumphalist history, that only mentions the glories and omits all the shame, anywhere in the Old Testament . See, for example, Neh. 9: 6 – 37; Ps. 89, Ps. 107; Ez. 16. Our Christian histories need to show the same honesty and humility as the histories of Israel. Even up to the present, they remain firmly triumphalistic.

*The Purification of our Church Identities*. As a result of the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, the identities of both became strongly marked by the negative spirit of controversy. So after the Reformation, the identity of Catholics was reshaped from what it had been in the Middle Ages. The post-Reformation identity of Catholics became marked by being anti-Protestant. So Catholics emphasized more all the things that Protestants denied: Mary, Eucharist, Pope; and so the divisions were hardened. The restoration of unity requires a purification of identities. A purified Christian identity will be totally shaped by what we positively believe, and not be characterized by what we are against. So a purified Catholic identity will be a Catholic Christian identity, one of being a son/daughter of God, and a follower of Jesus Christ within a purified Catholic tradition defined by authentic catholicity, that is to say, by seeking the fullness of the biblical revelation centred in Jesus Christ and revealed by the Holy Spirit.

This purification of identities in the context of a Christocentric renewal will abandon all forms of Catholic formation, which were first designed to make young people and children Catholic (in a narrow sense) and only secondarily concerned about the elements common to all Christians.

Ecumenism and Charismatic Renewal

For a variety of reasons, charismatic renewal has not had the impact on relations between the Churches that it should have had. For the Renewal is ecumenical of its nature. It is the first-ever movement of revival and renewal that has been received by Protestants and Catholics alike. It can also provide a corrective to the weaknesses of the ecumenical movement: its failure to impact the grass roots, its failure to inspire the younger generation despite the influence of Taizé and their annual festivals, its neglect of spiritual ecumenism (John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) can be seen as a corrective to this neglect).

Why did the charismatic movement and the ecumenical movement not really interact? After all, many see them as the two major movements of the Holy Spirit in the twentieth century. First, many Protestant charismatics were suspicious of the ecumenical movement as a merely human work (the widespread Evangelical and Pentecostal reaction), and this attitude also had an influence on charismatic Catholics. Second, theologians and ecumenists in the pro-ecumenical churches were generally unsympathetic to the charismatic movement, seeing it as primarily emotional and so as contributing nothing significant to the work for unity. Third, charismatic Catholics were typically drawn to obviously spiritual activities, expecting rapid visible fruit and were under-represented in the ecumenical activities requiring hard work and perseverance.

But this situation has been changing since the mid-1990s. First, *Ut Unum Sint* emphasized the spiritual character of all ecumenical work. Second, leading ecumenists have been recognizing that an ecumenical movement without the Evangelicals and Pentecostals lacks credibility. As a result major steps have been taken, e.g. in the Global Christian Forum (see their website), to bring together mainline Church leaders with Evangelical – Pentecostal leadership. Pentecostal scholars are more and more opening themselves to an ecumenical vision, even though their denominational leaders may lag behind.

Charismatics have the potential to revolutionize prayer for Christian unity. First, through common praise in which all can share equally. Before this outpouring of the Spirit, the only ways of Christians praying together were either joining in the prayers of a particular tradition or of composing a hybrid pattern that was nobody’s regular way of praying. But in the Renewal, the Holy Spirit has given all a new way of praise and worship that does not replace our received patterns, but gives them new life and enables all to pray in the same way. Second, by seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit how to pray for unity, and then praying with great confidence for the Spirit to bring about what the Spirit has inspired. Third, by a targeted intercession, that believes in the power of prayer to demolish barriers opposed to God’s purposes. Fourth, by a Spirit-led repentance for the sins of the past, especially sins against the unity of the Body.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Points for Discussion

1. How do you understand full communion and imperfect communion between the Churches? How can we help Catholics not to think in “outside – inside” terms?
2. Is there an ecumenical spirit and an ecumenical dimension in the life of your Renewal communities?

1. Can you witness to your own life as a Christian becoming more Trinitarian and more Christocentric? What has helped to bring this about?

1. In John Paul II’s letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), he called for the first time for a Catholic confession of sins of the past, and in first place for sins against unity (para. 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)