

Talk to Association of Inter-Church Families

Monday Morning: Swanwick, Aug. 30, 2004

I want to situate my challenge first in the framework of the wider ecumenical movement. That is to ask how AIF relates to the ecumenical movement. Does the history of AIF largely reflect the patterns of the wider ecumenical movement with its strengths and weaknesses or does it also challenge these patterns? Here I have a kind of personal confession to make. As many of you know, I was a regular participant in the first meetings of AIF at Spode House. In my sharing on Saturday, I mentioned how I moved from a phase of considerable involvement in “mainline ecumenism” to a phase of growing involvement in “Pentecostal-charismatic ecumenism”. In this transition, without losing my heart for church reconciliation and unity, I saw some weaknesses in the ecumenical movement more clearly. I also saw the AIF of the early years as marked by both the strengths and the weaknesses of the movement. That led in me to a certain distancing from the world of AIF, though I was happy still to receive the AIF mailings. But the ecumenical movement has been changing, I think AIF is changing, and I know that I have been changing.

In the ecumenical movement it has often been said, rightly and importantly, that what unites the separated Churches is greater and more basic than what divides them. In times of confessional strife, the emphasis was on what divides, and the distinctive tenets that the others deny tend to define our confessional and ecclesial identity. In a more ecumenical age, this can lead to much less attention being paid to the differences. We all know that the Catholic authorities are much given to emphasising the ongoing importance of distinctive Catholic tenets that pose problems to other Christians. I see one major challenge in the area of these differences. I see the differences as embodying at least two very different elements: (1) great riches that need purification (I think we can take it as axiomatic that whatever developed in isolation and opposition has to need purification) and (2) garbage that needs elimination. The separation and the purification are only possible through the activity and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

This need for purification addresses one of the weaknesses of the ecumenical movement, at least between the 1960s and the 1990s, its neglect of spiritual ecumenism. As you know, spiritual ecumenism was at the heart of the Vatican Two Decree on Ecumenism (paras. 6 – 8). It is one of the important contributions of John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* to have made spiritual ecumenism central once again. One example is his original idea that authentic dialogue necessarily involves an examination of conscience. I think that inter-church couples have an important role to play here, for by the very nature of your situation, you experience the shadow side of your Churches week by week if not day by day. And it causes you much pain.

I want here to refer to one of the most glaring failings of the Catholic Church, from which you have suffered: it is what some would call its lack of candour and some would simply call dishonesty. As some of you may know, I have been associated with

the magazine *Bible Alive* since its inception, and each year the magazine has had a theme for its teaching articles. I agreed to write a series for 2003 on the Dignity of the Human Person. As we wanted the first article for the January issue to touch on Christian unity, I took the theme of dialogue and made considerable use of Paul VI's first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* of 1964<sup>1</sup>. In this encyclical, Paul VI speaks of dialogue as the way of Jesus and the way of the Catholic Church. The Pope treated of the Church's relations with non-believers, with non-Christian religions, with other Christians and with fellow Catholics. With the usual Catholic emphasis on continuity with the past, it is implied that dialogue with its inherent respect for the dignity of the human person has always been the way of the Catholic Church. But if we are to be honest, we have to recognise here a real revolution in Catholic thinking. For one can hardly maintain that dialogue was the way of Pius IX, or for that matter of Pius X, Pius XI or Pius XII. There is a real lack of honesty about history here. The call to repentance has to address such patterns.

John Paul II has courageously called Catholics to confess the sins of the past. This was not just an exercise for the Jubilee year 2000, but belongs to the nature of reconciliation and the restoration of broken relations. We should expect this to feature ever more prominently in ecumenical relations, and the issue of honesty and trust has to be central. Marriage cannot work without trust. Ecumenical relations like all other human relations require trust. The lack of candour in Catholic ways of functioning makes a deep trust between the Churches very difficult, even though many important friendships have bridged this gap of mistrust. I think it is something that you can play a major role in correcting, as you seek the light and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. A repentance for the sins of the past has to address these patterns in Catholic behaviour if the real barriers to unity are to be removed.

While historians may well see the ecumenical movement and the Pentecostal-charismatic movements as two of the most important works of the Holy Spirit in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two have not found it easy to relate to one another. It is interesting and encouraging to me to see the role that some younger couples with some kind of charismatic background are now making to AIF, as well as what they are receiving<sup>2</sup>. My exposure to the Pentecostal-charismatic world has made me more aware of some other problematic elements in mainline ecumenism. One of considerable importance for AIF concerns the emphasis placed in Catholic documents on ecumenism on the centrality of the Church and the centrality of baptism. Now obviously there is an essential witness in the Catholic tradition to the centrality of the Church and to the foundational character of baptism, for the Church and thus for unity. However, the Pentecostal-charismatic witness concerns the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ, and the absolutely essential role of the Holy Spirit. And it is one of the complaints from the free church tradition and particularly from its revivalist sector that in the historic Churches, the Church institutions – including liturgies and sacraments – have

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<sup>1</sup> These articles have been collected and expanded into a small book, *The Banquet of Life*, which has recently been published by Alive Publications, Stoke-on-Trent.

<sup>2</sup> Cf the Monday morning sharing by the Judds.

operated in a way to obscure rather than to reveal the workings of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To these people, to say that all ecumenism is founded in baptism, a common baptism, is not reassuring, as long as baptism is spoken of in objectivised terms as a rite and not in terms of the verifiable activity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Somehow, we have to say that ecumenism is grounded in the joint missions of the Son and the Spirit, which are expressed in sacramental signs of which baptism is the first.

A couple of final comments directly about the AIF today. (1) I see it as good that there is a Free Church co-chair. But I think that there are 2 elements in this that both need somehow to be included: first, representing the free church traditions of Britain; and secondly, to be a vehicle to express the contribution of the evangelical-charismatic sector. I can see how Pamela Durney has made an important contribution in the second area in her work as co-chair, particularly in encouraging the inclusion of more prayer at different points of the conference. I would recommend here an avoidance of the term “happy-clappy”, which is disrespectful and unecumenical, and which often serves as a tool to avoid addressing the charismatic phenomenon.

(2) In the early days of AIF, the majority of participants were couples between 25 and 50, most with children to bring up. Today, there are many couples whose children have flown the nest, and who have more time to devote to issues outside the family and more time to travel together. I am thinking that there must be inter-denominational initiatives in which inter-church couples could make an important contribution. There are an increasing number of repentance-reconciliation initiatives springing up in the evangelical-charismatic world, and there are new kinds of events like the Stuttgart conference of May this year. You all have so much to give from the depth and intensity of your experience.