

RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM

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By now I suspect that everyone here has heard of receptive ecumenism. Although it is a relatively recent methodology I believe it already has a place in the ecumenical mainstream. For example, the communiqué from the inaugural meeting of the new phase of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III) stated that it was particularly helped by the approach of “receptive ecumenism” and is committed to modelling it in its work.¹ I have spoken about it on a number of occasions over the last couple of years and have been impressed at how eagerly people embrace it – almost as though it may be the saviour of an ecumenical movement which for some seems to have entered a period of malaise. I agree that receptive ecumenism has the potential to give new energy to the ecumenical movement. But to realise this potential we need to be aware of just exactly what receptive ecumenism is and consider how we can make it a successful methodology in our own situation.

In the time I have this morning I will give a brief background to receptive ecumenism and a comprehensive description of it. I will then situate this in a larger ecclesial and ecumenical context of the ancient notion of reception. Next I will look at some practical advice on how to go about this methodology. I will finish with two examples of receptive ecumenism.

Background

Receptive ecumenism is the brainchild of a Roman Catholic theologian at the University of Durham, Dr Paul Murray, and has taken shape around two international conferences. The first was held in 2006 and was called “Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning”.² This was followed by a conference in January 2009 on “Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Ecclesial Learning”. The second conference had a broader focus and gave space for several traditions to reflect on how they learn and what they are learning and can learn from others. The first conference had done the same thing, but with a focus on learning for the Roman Catholic Church.

I believe it is a fair judgement to say that the time seemed ripe for such a new approach to ecumenical activity. On the positive side we can all recognise that more than forty years of ecumenical dialogue have set our churches in a new relationship with each other. Most of the suspicions of an earlier era have disappeared: at the congregational level, people from different communities mix easily with each other; and at the level of church leadership, there are structures in place that give heads of churches the opportunity to meet regularly. So, despite the formal divisions that still exist among us, there is an awareness that more unites us than divides us. My own sense is that for some time we have been doing much to nurture what we already share together. But, of course, we can never be satisfied with this. On the negative side many would feel that we are at an impasse. Despite years of dialogue and the overcoming of some of the major doctrinal issues that divided us, we often appear to

¹ Communiqué from the Meeting of ARCIC III at Bose, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2011/5/27/ACNS4874>. Accessed 8 August 2011.

² See Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008).

be lost and looking for a way forward. This is another reason why the time is ripe for a new ecumenical methodology.

Description of Receptive Ecumenism

So what exactly is receptive ecumenism? Paul Murray says that the central idea requires that churches make what he calls a programmatic shift from asking what do our dialogue partners need to learn from us, to asking what do we need to learn and what can we learn from our dialogue partners.³ He contends that the bilateral and multilateral dialogues, if taken in isolation, are not capable of “delivering the self-critical openness to practical conversion, growth and development”.⁴ In other words, the focus in receptive ecumenism is not exactly the same as for traditional dialogues, which are concerned with matters of faith and order. This is not to say that matters of faith and order might not be relevant, but the focus will be different.

Paul Murray expresses the core principle of receptive ecumenism in these words: “... critical and constructive modes of theological analysis, the traditional preserve of historical and systematic ecclesiologists, need to be held together with pragmatic-organisational and other relevant empirical modes of analysis, the traditional preserve of practical theologians and social scientists.”⁵

Murray envisages that when we hold together these two modes of analysis they provoke a question such as: given the consensus that has been reached in the theological dialogue, what can my church learn from the other? Framed this way, the question is about a willingness to be self-critical and to be open to grow through learning from others. By and large the theological dialogues have produced important theoretical outcomes. Receptive ecumenism should take churches to the next step, building on these theoretical outcomes and looking for concrete expressions in each church’s own life.

A further characteristic of receptive ecumenism is its potential to help churches look with fresh eyes at their own situation, particularly the challenges and threats they face. It is obvious that at this time most churches face critical questions in relation to their internal life. Some have even reached an impasse on important matters of faith and witness. Think of the struggle many face in dealing with matters of authority and power in the church, or of ministry in the church and its adequate provision as the number of clergy decreases. Think too of the demographic change brought about, for example, by the ageing of church membership, and the challenge churches face to retain their young people. Most churches are dealing with diminishment in some form or other. Many also face difficult questions about gender and sexuality. All churches, in some manner or other, are likely to be thinking about how to present the gospel in the postmodern world where indifference has often been replaced by hostility. Receptive ecumenism may offer a way to learn from others in facing up to these challenges. In some cases it could result in breaking through the impasse.

³ Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, *Louvain Studies* 33(2008): 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ Paul D. Murray, “Expanding Catholicity through Ecumenicity in the Work of Yves Congar: *Ressourcement*, Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Reform,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13(2011), 287-288.

A Larger Context

Receptive ecumenism might be a new approach to ecumenism, but we must also remember that reception is an idea that goes right back to the earliest Christian witness. An appreciation of something of the nuances of this idea will help us understand better the potential of receptive ecumenism. Let's start with the New Testament, in particular Paul's words that he handed on what he received. The point here is that the apostolic faith must always be received before it can be handed on. When it is received it takes on a life in a new context among a new people. The example I am thinking of is 1 Cor 11 where Paul is dealing with division among the community at Corinth. He refers to what he received concerning the Last Supper, and uses this to admonish the practices at Corinth: some go hungry while others are gluttons. Paul is not simply repeating the account of the Last Supper; rather, he is asking his readers to receive it in such a way that it speaks a fresh word in a new context. He challenges those at Corinth to receive this teaching of Jesus. As long as there are factions among them, he says, they will have failed to receive the teaching. Here reception amounts to hearing the words of the Lord and appropriating them in such a way that they shape the concrete life of the community. Reception is integral in shaping the faith, life and witness of this people.

The notion of reception was also prominent in the early centuries of the Christian movement, particularly in the conciliar period. In brief, reception is a way of describing what happened to the decisions of the ecumenical councils as they entered the life of the church. Two things are to be noted. First, and more formally, the decisions of a council were ratified, as it were, at a subsequent council. Now this was a quite formal process and a necessary one; and reception at this level was formal and juridical. But something else also happened: there was a spiritual process by which the decisions of a council became part of the life of the local church. This normally happened through the liturgical, spiritual and theological life of the church. This in fact was a long process as new ways of thinking and speaking gradually had an impact on an already existing tradition of faith, life and witness.

Reception in the Ecumenical Movement

It is this latter idea – of reception as a spiritual process – that I believe has been important in the modern ecumenical movement, especially since the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982.⁶ In presenting the text the WCC's Faith and Order Commission called for a reception process within the churches. This, however, was a new idea for the churches.⁷ The process envisaged required churches to be self-critical, and to be open to conversion and renewal.

We are all very familiar now with the results of the reception of BEM. The spiritual process of reception, which affects the deeper aspects of the church's life, has now been going on for more than two decades. There are indications of positive outcomes. For example, many churches have used the insights of BEM in preparing new Eucharistic Prayers or Thanksgiving Prayers. In particular, there is a growing reception of the epiclesis as a central

⁶ For a more detailed study of this spiritual process see Gerard Kelly, *Recognition: Advancing Ecumenical Thinking* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

⁷ It is not surprising then, that in the years immediately following BEM numerous studies were undertaken about reception. For example, a whole issue of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21(winter 1984) was devoted to the reception of BEM. See also Edward J. Kilmartin, "Reception in History: An Ecclesiological Phenomenon and its Significance", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21(1984): 34-54; William G. Rusch, *Reception: An Ecumenical Opportunity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Also important is the earlier study of Yves Congar, "La reception comme réalité ecclésiologique", *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 56(1972): 369-404.

part of these prayers. Again, many churches have taken up the question of personal episcopal ministry as something they need to consider, and some have raised the possibility of introducing the threefold order of ordained ministry. Again, some churches that do not practise water baptism have begun to study this practice more intentionally and to ask whether they might adopt such a practice. Taken together, these examples suggest that the spiritual process hoped for at the time BEM was published is taking place within the life of the churches.

There is no doubt that the reception BEM called for was meant to take the churches beyond the dialogue phase of ecumenism, yet it depended on the dialogue. The dialogue could take the churches so far, but the next step required that they look at both themselves and their dialogue partners in terms of teaching, life and witness. So reception followed dialogue.

I suspect, however, that most churches working with BEM thought of it primarily as a means of focusing on their relationship with their dialogue partners. Yet, in practice it has probably had just as great an impact on their self-understanding and self-identity. Indeed, many commentators acknowledged that one of the spin-offs of BEM was a renewed confessionalism among the churches, which was evident in a form of what some might call “identity politics”. Now this can be positive or negative. It is negative if it builds walls around churches, effectively entrenching division. Sadly, in some cases this has happened. The positive dimension of this movement is probably better not labelled as confessionalism, but rather as the renewal of ecclesial identity. In this case it leads to a more authentic expression of church life, learning from the richness of the whole *oikumene*. This, I believe, is the point of receptive ecumenism: it will help our churches focus on their identity, but not in a narrow sectarian way that is not open to change. Rather, receptive ecumenism is a way for churches to learn, to grow and to change. In this way they become truer to their apostolic origins, and thus more able to offer a precious gift to the whole church.

Some Practical Advice about Ecclesial Learning

I want to sound a word of caution here. Despite this rather positive outlook, there is something else that we need to be aware of, and that is that there can be many non-theological factors that prevent ecclesial learning. We, like other churches, will have to ask ourselves, “what prevents ecclesial learning from taking place?” There can be many factors, including organisational, psychological, sociological and cultural.⁸

Moreover, before we rush headlong into the future, championing receptive ecumenism as the solution to all our woes, we need to be confident that it is something that our church can embrace willingly. Let’s not forget that the bottom line is that we are talking about change – not other churches changing, but my church changing. Change is never easy! In a paper given at the first Durham conference Ladislav Orsy cautioned in his opening remark: “receptive ecumenism among Christian churches is a delicate operation: it is authentic when it is marked by truth and transfused by prudence”.⁹ He went on to speak of three criteria for authentic reception. I believe we should become familiar with these criteria if we want to be confident that engagement with other churches will facilitate genuine ecclesial learning in our church.

The first criterion relates to identity and its preservation. No church can be expected to embrace a change that leads to a watering down of identity. We can speak of identity at two levels. The first is *Christian* identity, which refers to our core beliefs in Christ and our

⁸ Cf. Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning”, 36-37.

⁹ Ladislav Orsy, “Authentic Learning and Receiving – A Search for Criteria”, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Paul Murray (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 39.

basic formulas of faith. Any attempt to dilute these would fundamentally destroy the apostolic faith. The second is *confessional* identity. Here is where the major differences exist between the churches. Orsy, referring to the work of the Groupe des Dombes, asks whether we are now at a time when each Christian denomination needs to look inwards and ask how much of their confessional identity could be sacrificed in order to move closer to other churches. He is suggesting a spiritual process of self-emptying or *kenosis*. But this will only be authentic if it is a move towards a more authentic *Christian* identity.¹⁰ We thus have a two-stage process: on the one hand churches look inwards, examining themselves to discover their own limitations and incompleteness; and on the other hand they look outwards towards other churches, ready to find gifts and insights about the faith and how it is lived. This process is not about destroying diversity; on the contrary it recognises that the limits of diversity are defined by its capacity to express the mystery of Christ in all its richness.

The second criterion flows from this and relates to truth and falsity. The basic question each church has to face is this: how do we know that a new understanding or practice of the faith, as we are learning it from the other, is an authentic development of doctrine and not the abandonment of our Tradition. Relying on John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* Orsy names three signs of true development.¹¹ First, the new insight confirms the identity and foundational components of the particular doctrine or institution. Second, the new development blends into the old tradition or expression harmoniously, so that there is continuity between the old and the new, and the new can be seen as a further unfolding of the original insight. The third sign of authentic development is that it brings new life and vigour to the community. These three signs taken together should give churches confidence about what is authentic ecclesial learning.

The third criterion for authentic reception that Orsy gives is more practical and relates to prudent judgement. There comes a point when a community and its leaders must look beyond the theoretical and abstract findings of joint studies and make judgements about concrete, particular situations.¹² This will involve a judgement about the capacity of the community to embrace any change that may be proposed. It may also involve a judgement about the pace at which any change might take place in this community. We shouldn't imagine, however, that this judgement is simply a human decision. It should be a decision that involves a discernment of the Spirit, remembering that the Spirit fills the whole community with a supernatural sense of the faith so that it may be lived more authentically in the decisions and actions of daily life.

Seen in the light of these criteria, ecclesial learning is a creative process. Ecclesial learning should take an individual church a long way beyond simply taking what it sees in the other and trying to do the same thing. Rather, a church will chew over what it sees and hears, ponder what this could look like in its own, perhaps different, circumstances, and use all of its own traditions and resources to develop something that is fitting for this particular community.

Some Examples

I would like to give two examples of what I have been talking about.

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

¹² Ibid., 44.

The Durham Project on Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church

The first example is the project underway at Durham. This is a three to four year project, involving nine denominational groupings in northeast England.¹³ Each of the participating churches, including the Catholic Diocese of Hexham-Newcastle, has agreed to make available data about their church life. The project is looking at three areas. The first is governance and finance, and considers how the churches are organised and administered. It looks at the connection between financial administration and pastoral strategy – on the principle that a business plan or budget is really about putting numbers on a pastoral plan. The second area is learning and formation. It asks about the structures and processes that promote the transmission of Christian identity, faith and mission. It is also concerned to identify what impedes learning. The third area is leadership and ministry. It is asking questions about how the churches are responding to issues surrounding the declining numbers of clergy and ministers. It is also concerned to identify how churches nurture active congregations.

The purpose of the project is to gather data and analyse it so that all the participants might learn something about how the difficulties they experience in their own ecclesial culture and practices might be fruitfully addressed by learning from each other, and receiving examples of “best practice” from each other.

Last year I had the opportunity, with a small group in Sydney, to meet with Professor Geoff Moore, from the Durham Business School, who was visiting Australia. He is one of the key research people involved in this project, and is focusing on matters of governance, strategy and finance. He spoke to us about some of the results that were emerging. The project was at the stage where the data from all the churches had been analysed and each church had received a copy of its own results. A summary of the data relating to all the churches was also being prepared and would be shared among the participants. By the middle of last year some churches indicated their surprise at the picture they see reflected back to them by the researchers. Geoff Moore noted, for example, that most churches were struggling with what it means to think strategically. Strategy feels like the wrong word for them; it feels alien to being church. He also observed that the capacity to think strategically is very closely related to the governance structures of the particular church. This is raising ecclesiological issues for the churches.

As you can see, this ecumenical work is a very different paradigm to the normal ecumenical methodology, which is characterised by theological dialogue. The focus here is on the practical and the organisational. The three areas of exploration were chosen because they are crucial areas where all churches are confronted with questions about best practice and how to respond to the demands of modern organisational and economic life, while at the same time remaining faithful to the gospel. The practices can vary greatly, and they have often developed from certain theological presuppositions. Eventually this will open doors onto the theological, but only after travelling a very different route from the normal paradigm.

As Paul Murray says, the purpose of this project is to assist the churches to learn. Each will learn things that will help it grow in its capacity to respond to the demands of contemporary life. Rather than the focus being on what other churches can learn from our church, it is now clearly on what our church can learn from others.

¹³ See Paul D. Murray “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning”, 43-45. See also the newsletter “Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church: A Regional Comparative Research Project” at <http://www.centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Receptive-Ecumenism-Newsletter.pdf>, accessed 8 August 2011.

Safe as Churches

My second example is the *Safe as Churches?* initiative of the National Council of Churches in Australia. This goes back to an initial consultation in March 2004, so in fact almost two years before the first Durham Conference. I am not sure that anyone has ever thought of this consultation in terms of receptive ecumenism. However, if we look at the way this initiative has worked we recognise that it has provided a place for ecclesial learning for the churches that form part of this network. Up to the present time there have been five consultations among the churches.

The idea for a consultation was born out of the realisation that most of our churches were dealing with a growing number of cases of sexual misconduct. Some churches had already begun to put significant resources into facing up to the challenge this presented – in terms of supporting victims, establishing protocols for dealing with accusations, dealing appropriately with perpetrators, especially clergy, and providing adequate training in professional standards to church workers and pastoral carers. Other churches, often because they were smaller or had not experienced the same level of incidents, had not had the opportunity to develop adequate policies. The consultations were aimed at giving the churches a forum to share their experiences and resources. At the conclusion of the first consultation a summary was published, which among other things, had this to say: “While significant initiatives have already been taken in many Churches, a comprehensive approach is required for *Safe as Churches* to become a statement of reality. For this to happen all Churches will need ecclesiastical will, financial resources and a change of culture.”¹⁴

I suspect that the motivation of these churches was primarily to deal with a pathology destroying the life of the church: they engaged in learning on this issue because they had to. It was not a matter of finding something ecumenical to do. However, they could naturally be ecumenical because of the ecumenical journey they had been on for many decades. Perhaps this is an important insight about receptive ecumenism. It just may be that it will be most effective as a methodology when it is focused on matters that go to the heart of church life in all our churches. Rather than looking to be ecumenical – as we all made efforts to be in the early days of the ecumenical movement – we now act ecumenically as if by instinct. Together we grow strong churches so that the unity of the body of Christ may be a witness in the world. Receptive ecumenism reminds us that we need each other in order for any one of our churches to grow strong.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by noting that in the present ecumenical climate receptive ecumenism seems to be offering a new way to invigorate the ecumenical movement. It is appropriate to the degree of unity that we already share, particularly after the success of over forty years of ecumenical activity. But it is also necessary at a time when we seem to have reached a road block. I am confident that this new methodology can serve us well – not just because it is new, but because it emerges out of the ancient idea of reception. These deep roots in the Christian tradition suggest that receptive ecumenism is not an ephemeral moment in ecumenical time, but has the potential to develop into a lively instrument for ecclesial learning.

¹⁴ *Safe as Churches?* National Ecumenical Consultation on Sexual Misconduct and Abuse in Australian Christian Churches, Thursday, 04 March – Saturday, 06 March 2004, *Consultation Summary*, 3. See http://www.ncca.org.au/files/Departments/Safe_as_Churches/Consultation_Summary.pdf. Accessed 10 August 2011.