

A Family Divided (Thoughts on Christian Unity)

Prologue – The Early Days:

For many people, ecumenism (defined as “a movement promoting unity among Christian churches”) might seem a relatively recent development. However I recall making an effort in that area back when, as a teenager (therefore about forty-five years ago) I began to attend the local Presbyterian Church youth club. It then occurred to me that if I was enjoying the hospitality and facilities of a youth club run by the church my friends attended, then the least I could do as a courtesy was to go to a service with them from time to time (it was on a Sunday evening and I’d already been to Mass in the morning so surely that was OK). And so that’s what I did - and I didn’t get struck by lightning. I say that because the Catholic Church back then taught that you weren’t allowed to take part in non-Catholic services, indeed you were barely even allowed inside a non-Catholic church!

I remember that very subject coming up years before when I was in junior school. My Uncle Fred had died and was to have a “Chapel” service and I had asked the headmistress if I was allowed to attend and she said definitely not. When I got home and told my parents that I couldn’t go and why not, they said he was my uncle and I was going and that was that. ‘Plan B’ in such situations was not to join in any of the prayers or hymns - and so I didn’t, thus avoiding getting struck by lightning that time too!

The earliest official (and at the time quite innovative) efforts at ecumenical activity that I can remember were as far back as the early 1970s when I was working as a lay-missionary in Zambia. An ecumenical bible study group was organised in the local United Reformed Church hall - I remember we studied St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians – and it was quite an eye-opener to discover (in this case in our approach to the interpretation of scripture) how much we all had in common as opposed to how different we thought we were.

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In an episode of the documentary series “A Seaside Parish”, the Anglican vicar featured in the programme was visiting a young couple who had recently had a baby. Responding to the vicar’s question about the possibility of a christening, the baby’s mother said, “I’m actually a Catholic...but it doesn’t really matter.” It was almost as if she was apologising for her Catholic upbringing and, at the same time, trying to minimise any embarrassment that might have been caused. Either way, it struck me as a rather sad thing for someone to say. Also I know of a situation where, in order to demonstrate their objection to their parish having been amalgamated, some people go to the Anglican church on those Sundays when there isn’t a Mass scheduled in their former parish church, claiming “it’s all the same”!

In our ecumenical relationships and our hopes of once again uniting our divided Christian family, I don't think we can pretend our differences don't exist. In fact I think we have to admit to them and respect them. If they were of no consequence then, presumably, we wouldn't be worshipping God in all the various different ways that we do. The reality - and the sadness - is, however, that our Christian family is divided; it's not how God intended it to be but nonetheless it's the situation we have created. It would be wonderful if there was a magic button we could press that would wipe out the last four hundred and seventy years of our churches' history, but it isn't quite that simple.

On the positive side, with one or two sad exceptions we do seem to have overcome much of the bigotry that once kept us firmly apart, a bigotry that stemmed from our mutual "ignorance" of one another's spirituality, theology and practices, and a closed-mindedness that excluded any desire to better understand one another. But unfortunately the differences between us are less easily resolved than they were created in the first place.

I don't know if you have ever visited any of the French or Belgian battlefields of the First World War. In most places time has long ago healed the land and, as you look across rich green fields, it's almost impossible to imagine the carnage that once took place there or the resulting devastation. From time to time a farmer will unearth a remnant of barbed wire or an unexploded shell as he ploughs his fields. Elsewhere the remains of trenches are still to be seen, or have actually been preserved for posterity, a monument to the fighting that once took place and a physical reminder that it is something we must never repeat – though, sadly, we have and we do.

We are only too well aware of our church histories and the things that drove us apart, but more often than not we can meet together in the green fields of our common areas of belief – praying together, studying together, celebrating the things we hold in common. At the same time there are still a few trenches, once at the frontline of the conflicts that divided us, aspects of teaching and practice that will continue to keep us apart until greater minds than ours can settle on and decide our common ground and hopefully reunite our Christian family. In the meantime we don't need to be apologetic, rather we need to admit to and accept our differences – otherwise how do we know what areas need to be resolved in order to bring us back together?

In that sense our differences do matter and what makes us good Catholics will make us good Christians. Therefore we need to ask ourselves: What does it mean to be a Catholic? What does my baptism into the Catholic Church require of me? Am I fulfilling not only those requirements, but also all the other duties that I have

towards my faith community? And from where do I draw the strength that sustains me in those efforts?

If we don't have conviction in, and a commitment to, the Church to which we belong, the faith community that sustains us, where is our credibility in the eyes of those with whom we hope one day to be reunited? Will we treat belonging with them as lightly as we seem to treat belonging to our current faith family? On a more banal level, it would be rather like what we see with a football player who joins a particular club, is paraded in front of the media in the club's colours, and who states unequivocally his loyalty to his new team as he signs his four-year contract. Twelve months later, another club puts in a bid and he's off - his contract means nothing - and there he is in front of the media once again, in another set of colours, declaring his loyalty to yet another team as he now signs his name on their dotted line.

It ought to make a difference to us which "dotted line" we signed on at our baptism. It ought to make a difference to us which faith community sustains us spiritually, pastorally and sacramentally. Our Lord's own teaching and that of the Church¹, is that his kingdom is open to all who come to him in faith and even to those who, through no fault of their own, haven't had the word of God preached to them. Even those who claim to be Christian may be making their faith journey unnecessarily difficult, although (as the parable of the wedding garment teaches) none of us can ever afford to become complacent or presumptuous.

Let's say someone were to ask you the best way to go by car to somewhere at the other end of the country. Do you recommend the most scenic route, or the most direct, or the least congested, or the fastest, or simply the one you prefer explaining all the reasons why you prefer it? Surely when it comes to our following of Christ, we have chosen what we consider to be the best way and therefore we not only take that road with conviction and commitment, but we would want to see others discover that same route for themselves, share our experience, and reach the same destination with us, safe and sound.

In his poem "The Elephant in the Room", Terry Kettering writes:

There's an elephant in the room.

It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it.

*Yet we squeeze by with "How are you?" and "I'm fine"
and a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.*

We talk about the weather. We talk about work.

We talk about everything else, except the elephant in the room.

¹ John 10 v 16, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para's 836-848

The expression an “elephant in the room” refers to a situation that is glaringly obvious and yet everyone is trying to ignore it as if it doesn’t exist because, perhaps, no one knows what to do about it. Christian unity will never be achieved by tip-toeing around the “elephant” of the issues that keep our faith family divided, but can only be helped by an honest admission that we’d like to put the pieces back together again - which necessarily means admitting that differences do indeed exist. And those differences matter because they also help us to recognise our common ground, and it is that which provides a starting point for our hopes and a subject for our prayers.

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