

RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM: AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

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The following paper is offered as a reflection piece: it was presented by Very Rev Denis Stanley, Episcopal Vicar for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, to the Uniting Church's Christian Unity Working Group Meeting in Melbourne in October 2012 as a way of bringing their gathering to a conclusion. South Australian Council of Churches is pleased that Denis has accepted our invitation to make his paper more widely available as we each explore and engage with Receptive Ecumenism.

First of all let me say what a 'surprising honour' it is to be with you today. 'Surprising' because although I do chair our Catholic Archdiocesan Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission here in Melbourne, the only 'keynote addresses' I regularly give is a Sunday Sermon in my Parish Church in Frankston.

It's an 'honour' because from experience I know of the commitment of the Uniting Church to the call of deeper Christian Unity right from its genesis until today. Although the pilgrimage to greater Christian Unity has had and is having its twists and turns, to have, as fellow pilgrims, members of the Uniting Church has been for me very enriching. So thanks for the surprising honour.

I would like to share with you a cross between a homily and a few disjointed thought starters. With you I am a learner.

First, I know in one of the streams of liturgical tradition of the Uniting Church that demands at the celebration of the Holy Communion that a warrant to be read before the Great Prayer is prayed. The 1st Corinthians account of the Lord's Supper is then read as a basis for celebrating this service – it authenticates the act of worship as Christ centred.

So, as I have been asked to take up a reflection on Receptive Ecumenism before a gathering of Uniting Church folk, my first instinct was to search for a warrant to read. Not only because I know that it is a part of the UCA tradition, but also to begin in a worshipful way.

So the warrant I take might be a surprising one. It's taken from the 1st letter of John 1: 8-9:

'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness'

I have chosen that unlikely warrant because I hope to begin my reflection on Receptive Ecumenism by grounding it in the journey one might make in the Sacrament of Reconciliation – or confession. This sacramental moment is part of the journey of conversion and healing.

In the Roman Catholic tradition the Sacrament of Reconciliation *is* an act of worship – a prayerful, ritual celebration of a heart touched by sorrow seeking God's mercy and reconciliation with God and the Christian community. Now before celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a Catholic is encouraged to ponder what is called, 'an examination of conscience'.

These are a series of questions based on the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes or the summary of the law – love of God and neighbor. These are meant to awaken some recognition of sinfulness in one's life, to help pinpoint what is really preventing a more authentic discipleship of Jesus and of course, awakening the memory of God's mercy and the hope that flows from God's patient mercy.

An 'examination of conscience' can be and indeed should be, searching and realistic.

An 'examination of conscience' is only part of the journey of conversion and must be a means to an end – a life transformed by grace. It takes a commitment to the spiritual life seriously, it hopefully helps us to a more authentic understanding of ourselves and helps us to honestly deal with the implications of conversion and healing.

Because I think that is what 'Receptive Ecumenism' is committing us to; it is an 'ecclesial examination of conscience' with all the implications of those Gospel words – metanoia and therapeuo – conversion and healing.

Now let me slip in here a working definition of Receptive Ecumenism. The central idea requires that churches make 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.

Bilateral and multilateral dialogues, if taken in isolation, are not capable of 'delivering the self-critical openness to practical conversion, growth and development'.

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 are not relevant, but the focus and the process will be slightly different or expanded.

The question might now be: 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. There is that image of an 'ecclesial examination of conscience'.

We know, by and large the theological dialogues have produced important theoretical outcomes; Receptive Ecumenism invites 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 many of our churches face critical questions in relation to their internal life. Some have even reached an impasse on important matters of faith and witness.

Now, is there anything new in 'Receptive Ecumenism'? Yes and No.

No, in the sense that it builds on the ancient idea of **reception**, the process of how the early church made its own the teaching of the scriptures and councils.

A process that goes on today as our communities, over time, make their own decisions of Synods and Bishops, Presbyteries and Encyclicals, Saints and Theologians, by listening, deciding, testing, waiting and worshipping.

So at first blush, the phrase 'Receptive Ecumenism' sounds a little strange. Isn't ecumenism 'receptive' by definition? Ecumenism demands intentional acts of attention, listening, hearing and taking to heart. If ecumenism isn't 'receptive' it would not have achieved half of what it has.

No, also in the sense that ecumenism as 'an exchange of gifts' was mentioned back in 1995, for Catholics, at least, when Pope John Paul II mentioned in his letter 'Ut Unum Sint' – dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some ways it is always an exchange of gifts' (UUS 28)

An idea the Pope had picked up from the second Vatican Council's "*Constitution on the Church*" from 1964 and develops ecumenically: can I learn to perceive the gift in the other, that I can authentically receive myself?

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council on Ecumenism also speaks powerfully about conversion. “*There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion.*” (Unitatis Redintegratio 7)

So, Receptive Ecumenism does pull together a few threads from the Roman Catholic theological past. Yes, some may think “Receptive Ecumenism” is a Catholic plot.

Indeed, if not quite a plot, it has been developed by Catholics to challenge and refresh our attitudes to ecumenism. It has a strong dynamic for change and is clearly part of the ongoing struggle over the interpretation of Vatican II.

Is there anything new in “Receptive Ecumenism”? Yes, in the sense, as I’ve said, in the self-critical openness to practical conversion, growth and development or to put it more positively, a commitment to the possibility of “ecumenical learning”.

So why might we need a model called “Receptive Ecumenism”? Because reception is not taken seriously enough; the disappointments and frustrations of the ecumenical movement are partly about not letting reception hold full sway.

So while “Receptive Ecumenism” was launched in 2006 mainly by Catholics to challenge our ecumenical commitment, it is a model that does matter ecumenically.

However, since I have been reading about “Receptive Ecumenism” and listening to Paul Murray, the midwife of this new model for dialogue, especially on his recent visit to Australia, it has struck me how demanding the model is – as conversion and healing is for the individual, even more so is it for communities which it is addressing.

So we sound a word of caution here. We know that there can be many non-theological factors that prevent ecclesial learning. Each church will have to ask itself “what prevents ecclesial learning from taking place?” Of course, there can be many factors, including organisational, psychological, sociological and cultural.

One of the papers from the 2006 conference in Durham that launched “Receptive Ecumenism” is entitled, “*Jerusalem, Athens and Zurich – psychoanalytic perspectives on factors inhibiting Receptive Ecumenism.*” Giving a hint at the broader, deeper, more searching and self-critical approach that ecumenical learning might take us.

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 own church can ponder embracing. Let’s not forget that the bottom line is that we are talking about change in churches – not only other churches changing, but my church changing. Change is never easy!

But change might be gracious if we are led through a thoughtful “examination of conscience.”

In Pope John Paul’s 1995 letter, “*Ut Unum Sint*” on commitment to ecumenism, he has a thought provoking section called, “*dialogue as an examination of conscience.*” It’s from here I must confess I pinched my Biblical warrant of 1John 1:8-9!

In this section, he uses the expression, “**dialogue of consciences**” not only as a way of inviting us to examine the sins – personal and structural – that we have committed against each other. But he **also** speaks of a “**dialogue of consciences**” that help us pinpoint together what might be some of the things that are preventing us from learning from each other – or **receive** – with integrity from our dialogue partners.

This is first of all a spiritual process, which part of the reason I have cast my reflection of Receptive Ecumenism with the example of an “examination of conscience” – which is yes, partly an intellectual experience, but principally a spiritual discipline.

Why might we delve into the world of conscience and conversion and healing? Why have we got to a point like this?

Over forty years of intense theological dialogues have set our churches in a new relationship with each other.

Many 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.

We have done much to nurture what we already share together. That, by the way, continually needs to be remembered and celebrated and so not taken for granted.

But can we ever be satisfied with peaceful co-existence? And let's not forget that there are issues that divide us – gifts to share that we are not sure we would want to receive. Do changes in the ecumenical landscape stop the pilgrimage because the map is slightly outdated? Or does our conscience stir us to gaze at a wider horizon?

I think that it is true that we are at a certain impasse. Despite years of dialogue and the convergence, or indeed overcoming of some of the major doctrinal issues that divided us, we often appear to be lost and looking for a way forward.

New and serious church-dividing issues have arisen and so also have internal issues of identity or diminishment within our churches, and so we are tempted to use precious energy and resources on “keeping our show on the road”. We know this.

I don't wish to underestimate the value of theological dialogues, (after all we launched a Baptist/Uniting Church Report just last night) and these do foster a desire to enter as deeply as possible in to the mindset of the other. But it is true that bi-lateral reports and agreed statements have brought us only to a certain point.

I am speaking particularly here from my experience in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Dialogue. The international dialogue between those two churches is getting on now for fifty years, yet was stalled for the last eight years and was uncertain if it would continue. Only last year did ARCIC III hold its first meeting.

The present international group (ARCIC III) has changed its model of engagement to take on board “Receptive Ecumenism”. They have committed themselves to a process of “ecclesial learning”.

The **process** of dialogue will be different and so we hope the outcome will probably look a little different also. **If** they end up producing a document – an agreed statement – like they have in the past, it will look different and so will ask the authorities of the two dialogue partners to respond in a different way.

Significantly they have also accepted, I believe, that this round of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Dialogue will take more time, will need more patience and draw on wider abilities than academic theology.

So why might we need a model called “Receptive Ecumenism”? Because reception is not taken seriously enough; the disappointments and frustrations of the ecumenical movement are partly about not letting reception holding full sway.

If in receptive ecumenism we have a model, what might be the next step? Well, putting “ecclesial learning” into practice and realizing “ecclesial learning” invites us into the dynamics of conversion and healing.

Where do we go to from here? Three points to consider.

1. The Durham project: ecumenical dialogue of governance, strategy and finance.

I draw your attention to what is called the “Durham project on Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church.” This project is sponsored by the Theology Department of the University of Durham in the UK where the leading thinkers on Receptive Ecumenism are based.

It is a study of churches in the northeast of England that have made a lot of data on their church life available to the researchers in the Theology Department. The topics of research are not Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, but Governance and Finance, Learning and Formation and Leadership and Ministry.

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 are 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. The purpose of this project is to assist the churches to learn.

Here is an ecumenical dialogue where the emphasis is on lived structures, systems and practices of the churches – can the practical and organisational act as portals into theology?

Are we ready to develop ways to facilitate that kind of much broader and deeper ecumenical learning? Grounding our ecclesiology within and between churches in the concrete realities of church life? As Paul Avis, an Anglican ecumenical theologian, has said, a “Land Rover ecclesiology” rather than simply a “Rolls Royce ecclesiology”. Drawing not simply on theology and history – but also the social sciences.

This challenge to write a “Land Rover ecclesiology” – to pinpoint both rhetoric and reality is certainly a challenge – an “examination of conscience” for my own community.

2. Commitment to developing an ecumenical learning strategy

The model of Receptive Ecumenism is beginning to provide us with a frame work for action. But it needs to be put to the test – as they have tried with the Durham project. To take up the model of Receptive Ecumenism, dialogue groups – official or unofficial - would need to look at how they choose topics, how their process of working and writing together takes place and who is on the team.

It would need some thought and commitment to developing an ecumenical learning strategy to help dialogue groups to consider what that might look like.

How do we prepare ourselves and each other to write and share a “Land Rover ecclesiology”, to let the practical and organisational act as portals into theology and allow for a “**dialogue of conscience**”?

3. More intentionally relational/local ecumenism

If Receptive Ecumenism is a broader and deeper structured learning about each other and ourselves – an examination of our ecclesial consciences as it were – it will need much more intentionality from us to encourage and enable relational grass roots ecumenism. We know this happens, and indeed it is probably a lot healthier than some of our ecumenical structures.

Receptive Ecumenism won't work as a model for reflection and possible action if the personal engagement of listening, deciding, testing, waiting, and worshipping don't happen.

Many a theological dialogue can give testimony to the depth of convergence that occurs over time, working, thinking and praying together – when they do “examine their consciences” together.

While this is one of the strengths of theological dialogue groups it is also the weakness. For that personal encounter, conversion and growth cannot be shared simply through the published agreed statements or reports.

Ecclesial learning, as suggested in the Receptive Ecumenism model, needs to use and harvest the personal connections we have. The story we heard last night of Sandy Yule, tapping Gwyn Milne on the shoulder and suggesting a Baptist – Uniting Church dialogue was, I thought, inspired.

To conclude, I chose the idea of an “examination of conscience” linked to confession, leading to conversion and healing, as a way to describe how adopting a model of “Receptive Ecumenism” is not a quick fix or a fad. It gives a broader and deeper context to our theological dialogues, because it gives a broader and deeper way of understanding our churches and so sharing that with each other.

It would draw in wider ways of helping us to be more self-critical and asking ourselves “what prevents ecclesial learning from taking place?”

“An examination of conscience” also reminds us how costly the journey of conversion and healing is and why we shouldn't be surprised how hesitant, how reluctant or uncertain we as churches might be to undertake that journey. As indeed we can be as individuals to set out faithfully and authentically on the journey of conversion and healing.

“Receptive Ecumenism” reminds us that the heart of ecumenism *is* the whole process of receiving each other; that's why we have got as far as we have, and why, if we are going to get any further, under God, we need to do that better. But it's a delicate art.

The best I can do is to conclude with the warrant.

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

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