

Ecumenism: A New Paradigm

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The ecumenical movement was inspired by the prayer of Jesus after the Last Supper: “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” (Jn 17:21) Inspired by this vision Christians belonging to various Churches felt the need to unite together as one Church. It was not, of course, easy since there were doctrinal and organizational differences between the Churches, which led to the divisions in the first place. So a movement was started, not only to pray for such a unity, but also to start discussions to reach doctrinal agreement in the first place. The Catholic Church, of course, felt that it was the ‘mother’ Church from which the other Churches separated themselves. So it imagined that the discussions would lead to the coming back of the other Churches to the one, true, original Church. The fact that it considered the other groups as ‘separated brothers’ indicated such an attitude. Though most other Churches came together in an organization called the “World Council of Churches”, the Catholic Church kept out of this union. Given its numbers, it would have dominated the group. Neither the Catholic Church nor the other Churches wanted this to happen. On the other hand, there was no equal common ground. The Catholic Church would not even consider many of the groups in the World Council of Churches as Churches in any formal sense, both from the point of view of matters of belief and from the point of view of sacramental and ministerial structures of life and organization. So to start with, the Catholic Church

started doctrinal dialogues on controversial issues with the comparatively bigger Churches like the Lutheran, the Anglican and the Baptist Churches. It also became a member of the “Faith and Order” group of the World Council of Churches. A certain stress was laid on doctrinal agreement. Even ministerial and sacramental structures were seen as doctrinal issues – that is, matters of belief, not merely of liturgical and ministerial praxis. So most of the discussions were of a theological nature. For the Catholic Church not only the Creed and the dogmas in which they were later explained in the course of history, under attack from heretics, but also the sacramental and ministerial structures were seen as divinely instituted by Jesus Christ and so not changeable. The Catholic Church believed that divine revelation was over and fixed once for all with the death of the last Apostle – though the Church needed some centuries to become fully aware of it. Actually the process still continues, as when the Pope declares new dogmas like the “Assumption of Mary into heaven” as being part of the faith of the Church. So any serious change became almost impossible. It ‘needed’ an ecumenical council even to change the language of worship from Latin to other local languages. So how much the Church is open to any serious changes in doctrinal formulations and sacramental and ministerial practices is a question.

Anyway, the Catholic Church did initiate discussion groups with the Lutherans, the Anglicans and others. It was also active in the ‘Faith and Order’ group of the World Council of Churches discussing theological issues. A group of Catholics and Lutherans explored the question of Justification. Another group of Catholics and Anglicans studied the problem of authority in the Church, especially that of the Pope. The Faith and Order group produced many agreed documents on ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’, ‘Towards a common expression of the Apostolic Faith today’, ‘The Church and the World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of the Human Community’ and ‘The Nature and Purpose of the Church’. But none of these documents

have been officially approved by all the member Churches. A certain convergence, however, is gladly noted by all concerned. When the Churches take up sacramental and ministerial structures, they may prove even more complicated, because they involve, not only theology, but also culture. For example, how will the Roman Catholic Church and, more importantly, the Eastern Churches will envisage the question of women Bishops will be a very difficult question.

When we look at this situation, the ecumenical vision of 'One Church' seems simply unattainable. In such a context I wonder whether the ecumenical movement, without abandoning the ideal goal of 'One Church', can have more intermediate goals. This may be even more urgent when we see more and more people leaving the Churches in the so-called Christian countries. We should certainly appreciate and encourage the heroic efforts that the ecumenists are making. But at the same time we should perhaps explore other possibilities of collaboration and living and working together as disciples of Christ sent into the world to proclaim and build up the Kingdom of God.

Our Experience of Interreligious Dialogue

It is at this stage that I think that our experience of dialogue between religions, as it has been developing in recent years, may give us some new ideas and perspectives. Dialogue between religions, especially between Hinduism and Christianity, had started in the early decades of the 20th century. Good and holy elements, as later the Second Vatican Council would say, were found in Hinduism. The goal was of course was to preach Christ and Christianity and to convert others. But Christianity was not presented as totally different from Hinduism, but as the ultimate end in which Hinduism

will find its fulfilment. A Christian missionary, J.N. Farquhar, wrote a book presenting Christianity as 'The Crown of Hinduism' (1913). A Jesuit missionary, Pierre Johanns attempted to show through a series of pamphlets - 'To Christ through the Vedanta' (1930-32) - that a serious study of the Vedantic philosophical schools will lead them to find fulfilment in Christ. Two French priests – Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux – founded an Indian Christian Ashram in Shantivanam, near Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, seeking to help Hinduism to discover its destiny in the mystery of the Trinity.

At the Second Vatican Council, the Church affirmed that God is the origin and goal of all the religions and that good and holy elements were found in all religions which need to be saved. In two of its documents on Religious Liberty and the Church in the Modern World, it insisted on the fact that God speaks to each human in his/her conscience and each person is bound to follow God's voice. The document on The Church in the Modern World speaks of "all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery."¹ In October 1986, inviting the leaders of all the religions to come together to Assisi (Italy) to pray for world peace, St. John Paul II implicitly recognized that they can reach out to God in prayer and that God will hear their prayer. In his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* (1991), he further affirmed that the Spirit of God is present and active, not only in the heart of each individual, but also in their cultures and religions.² In the same year the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization acknowledge in a joint-document, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), that the people of all the religions can reach out to God and be saved, not in spite of, but in and through their own religions.³

What is interesting is that this change in the status of other religions as mediations of salvific divine-human encounter has transformed the relation between the religions and the Church. Let us look at that story.

The Church and the Kingdom

In the past the goal of mission was building up the Church. For many centuries the Church affirmed that there is no salvation outside the Church. Of course, the Church refers to the Catholic Church. Belief in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. So the Christian proclaimed this 'truth' to the world and sought to convert others to believe in Jesus Christ as saviour and become members of the Church through baptism. An actual experience of the believers of other churches and religions began questioning this absolute conviction of the Catholics. I am not interested here in tracing the history of this change in perspectives, but just point out this change and draw the consequences. The Second Vatican Council can be our starting point to understand this change. The very first decree of the Council on the Liturgy insisting on the need for inculturating the ritual questioned the monolithic character of the Catholic Church.⁴Theologians used to identify the Church and the Kingdom of God. But the Document on the Church affirmed that the "the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men."⁵ It says further that the Church "receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is, on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom."⁶The Church, therefore, is not the kingdom (of God), but its sacrament, that is, sign and instrument or, in modern terms, symbol and servant.

Once such a distinction is made between the Church and the Kingdom of God, the goal of mission or proclamation becomes the realization of the Kingdom of God and of the Church as its symbol and servant. At the same

time, there is also a realization that the other religions too can relate to the Kingdom of God directly and not necessarily through the Church, precisely because the Spirit of God is present and active in them.

St. John Paul II

St. John Paul II points, both to the distinction and the relation between the Church and the Kingdom in his encyclical letter *The Mission of the Redeemer*. Speaking of the Kingdom, he says:

The Kingdom of God is meant for all mankind, and all people are called to become members of it⁷ ... The Kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the Kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the Kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness.⁸

John Paul II had said earlier in the same letter:

The Old Testament attests that God chose and formed a people for himself, in order to reveal and carry out his loving plan. *But at the same time God is the Creator and Father of all people; he cares and provides for them, extending his blessing to all (cf. Gen 12:3); he has established a covenant with all of them (cf. Gen 9:1-17).*⁹(emphasis mine)

He says further:

The Church is the sacrament of salvation for all mankind, and her activity is not limited only to those who accept her message. She is a dynamic force in mankind's journey toward the eschatological Kingdom, and is the sign and promoter of Gospel values (GS 39). The Church contributes to mankind's pilgrimage of conversion to God's plan through her witness and through such activities as dialogue, human promotion, commitment to justice and peace, education and the care of the sick, and aid to the poor and to children.¹⁰

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

The Theological Advisory Committee of the FABC, in its *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, has this to say:

The focus of the Church's mission of evangelization is building up the Kingdom of God and the building up of the Church to be at the service of the Kingdom. The Kingdom therefore is wider than the Church. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, visibilizing it, ordained to it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it.¹¹

A theological consultation on "Evangelization in Asia" organized by the Office for Evangelization of the FABC says:

The Kingdom of God is therefore universally present and at work. Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent Divine Mystery which impinges upon them, and go out of themselves in love and service of fellow humans, there the Reign of God is at work... "Where God is accepted, where the Gospel values are lived, where the human being is respected... there is the Kingdom." In all such cases people respond to God's offer of grace through Christ in the Spirit and enter into the kingdom through an act of faith... This goes to show that the Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together; it is the fundamental "mystery of unity" which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart.¹²

The Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC, in its document on *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, recognizes "in all sisters and brothers, of whatever faith-conviction and culture, fellow way-farers to God's Reign."¹³

What is important here is to note that the other religions can relate to the Kingdom of God directly without passing through the Church. The goal of salvation history then becomes, not the Church but the Kingdom of God and the Church contributes to it through the various ways indicated by John Paul II in the previous page.¹⁴

Religions and Churches

Inspired by the post-Vatican II development of the theology of religions recognizing that the religions can lead their followers to salvific divine-human encounter and thus shifting the centre or goal of history (and mission) from the Church to the Kingdom of God and applying a similar process of reflection in the field of ecumenism I would like to suggest, first of all, that we recognize the identity and worth of the different Churches in themselves and not always in comparison with the Catholic Church and pointing out to what are considered their defects. Secondly, these Churches, like the other religions, can facilitate salvific divine-human encounter in their own ways, whatever be their defects when looked at from our point of view. Thirdly, can the goal of the ecumenical movement be the Kingdom of God and not one institutional Church characterized by a particular definition of doctrine and special sacramental and ministerial structures? Fourthly, can we encourage active collaboration between the Churches in their relation to the world, while encouraging dialogue which can promote a convergence, if not total communion, among themselves, strengthening us as disciples of Jesus Christ committed to the building up of the Kingdom of God as a community of freedom and fellowship, love and justice. In this process we will also be reaching out as churches towards the other religions, because the Kingdom is also their goal, so that ecumenical dialogue will merge into interreligious dialogue. Let me now unpack this dense paragraph.

Acceptance of the Other Churches

All the Christian Churches who are members of the World Council of Churches believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ as universal saviour and in God as the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Their origin may have various reasons like the personal conviction of Luther, the revolt

of King Henry VIII of England against the political and religious authority of the Pope, the special spiritual experience of John Wesley, etc. On the one hand the Roman Catholic Church was rigid in its hierarchical organization and a certain clericalism linked to political and economic power. Luther, for instance, by translating the Bible into the German vernacular made it accessible to the people. He also encouraged the people to read the Bible and feel free to interpret it. He protested against the sale of indulgences and the consequent link between ritual and money power. By favouring individual initiative he did promote a certain democratic structure in the community. The Anglican and Methodist Churches were very much influenced by the cultures of the communities in which they flourished, whatever may have been their origin. The Churches in the Anglican communion, for instance, are much more inculturated. There are of course attendant problems linked to these developments. But they are being met in a democratic way at the different levels.

What is at their core is a commitment to the Christological and Trinitarian vision of faith. In the field we can see how they are devoted to the poor and the marginalized on the one hand and struggling with the forces of secularization on the other. This is what makes them Christian and they are zealous of their identity. A personal contact with them helps us to realize that these Churches, through the Bible and through whatever community ritual they have, do facilitate divine-human encounter. In this sense we can recognize them as ways to the Kingdom of God just as we accept the other religions as ways to God and God's kingdom.

The Goal of the Ecumenical Movement

As I said at the beginning of this paper, the inspiration for the ecumenical movement was the prayer of Jesus for the disciples: "That they

may all be one". This prayer has been interpreted by all those involved in the ecumenical movement, whatever the Church they belong to, as Jesus wanting ONE CHURCH, with one doctrinal statement, one hierarchical/ministerial structure, one sacramental system, etc. In practice all these have become theological issues. Even the ministerial and sacramental structures are seen as theological problems. So the ecumenical movement has become the affair of theological experts spending time in endless meetings seeking to arrive at agreed formulations of doctrines. The real problem, of course, is that these doctrinal positions are supported by philosophical systems. For example, the theology of the Roman Catholic Church is conditioned and controlled by Greek Scholastic philosophy. The Eastern Churches may have a more supple system of thinking that is more symbolic. The modern Western Churches may be following various modern philosophical schools. In the midst of such a variety of philosophical schools one can wonder whether any formal philosophico-theological agreement can be reached at all. For theologians who are trying to inculturate their faith in other philosophical systems, elite or popular, in Asia and Africa, all these European discussions may be irrelevant. Any serious effort at inculturating theology cannot accept one uniform formulation considered universally valid. So one can wonder whether contemporary ecumenical discussions are really trying to achieve the impossible, because they are taking for granted that one universal theology is possible. This is questionable, not only among the Churches, but within each Church. The Roman Catholic Church may not be currently facing this problem, simply because it fails to recognize theological pluralism in the Church. This does not mean that the problem does not exist. Even at the moment, such theological formulations may not mean much for a Chinese or an Indian.

A New Vision

I would like to suggest that *the vision of Jesus is a universal communion of peoples that would embrace, not only all the Churches, but all the religions and even those without any religion*, since such people seem to be increasing in number. The vision of Jesus, as understood by Paul, is to bring all things together. He tells the Ephesians that God's plan is "to gather up all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph 1:10) He tells the Colossians: "For in him (Christ) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven". (Col 1:19-20) If this is God's vision, this must have been Christ's vision too. We must be busy assembling a cosmic communion, rich in pluralism and celebrating differences, rather than worried about building one institutional Church, with one agreed formula of doctrine and one ministerial structure. Where pluralism is respected, there will also be a democratic order.

Given the pluralism of cultures, philosophies, and also Churches and religions, we should not be spending time on agreed statements of doctrine. So we come to the familiar idea that we should focus on orthopraxis than orthodoxy. At the level of our faith and our understanding of it we may disagree and consensus may be difficult to reach. At a given stage we may have to accept a pluralism of perspectives. But that pluralism need not stop us from collaborating in promoting mutual love and service, justice and peace in the world. Hardly any Church or religion will forbid us from pursuing these values in the process of building community. We are not certainly aiming at uniformity nor even at unity, but at community which can accept pluralism. I think that it is this perspective that is missing when groups are involved in seeking agreed conceptual/philosophical formulations of faith and uniform sacramental and ministerial structures. Focusing on the cultural and philosophical field of Europe (and North America) it is ignoring the cultures

of the majority of the world. I wonder why the Churches in the Third World should take these discussions and formulations seriously.

So I suggest that the Churches and religions in the Third world should launch, not an ecumenical nor even an interreligious movement, but a quest for peace and harmony that would respect pluralism, accept and celebrate differences and address conflict at all levels, including the religious. Ecumenism, in any case, will remain a discussion between primarily First World Churches. Adopting a rational and dichotomous (either-or) Scholastic approach they will never solve their problems. For us context is crucial and life is more important than doctrine. So I think that we should search for a new paradigm that transcends even ecumenism and searches for harmony and communion in pluralism.

Conclusion

In concluding, therefore, this reflection, I suggest that the goal of ecumenism need not be one universal, institutional Church, but a communion of Churches. A minimum agreed creed may be insisted on, as it is done for membership in the World Council of Churches. Common action towards the building of a Kingdom community of freedom and fellowship, love and justice is possible. Common, non-liturgical, prayer should be possible. At the liturgical-sacramental level people who have a common faith in what they are doing can participate in one another's celebration. Differences at all levels can be accepted and respected, even celebrated. We are aiming, not at unity, but communion. The kind of openness we are discovering at the level of inter-religious relations can be shown more easily at the level of inter-church fellowship. In this way we can move towards a cosmic communion. We are not denying any differences. But we are wondering whether we can transcend them at a higher level. And we can ask ourselves whether it is not this kind of communion of all the peoples of God that Jesus was praying for.

The principle of communion is not doctrinal or structural but the faith that we are all children of the same God, Creator, Reconciler and Inspirer.

Endnotes

1. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.
2. No. 28.
3. No. 29.
4. See Sacrosanctum Concilium, Nos. 21-40, specially 21 and 37-40.
5. See Lumen Gentium, 1.
6. *Ibid.*, 5.
7. *The Mission of the Redeemer*, 14.
8. *Ibid.*, 15.
9. *Ibid.*, 12.
10. *Ibid.*, 20.
11. Gnanapiragasam and Wilfred (eds), *Being Church in Asia* (Manila: Claretians, 1994), p. 21.
12. *For All the Peoples of Asia, Vol II* Ed. By Josef Eilers (Manila: Claretian Publications, 1997), p.200
13. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
14. Cf. *The Mission of the Redeemer*, 20.