

# **Receptive Ecumenism as a Catholic Calling: Catholic Teaching on Ecumenism from Blessed Pope John Paul II to His Holiness Pope Francis**

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## **Receptive Ecumenism<sup>1</sup>: The Basic Idea**

Compared with the high hopes and heady days following the entrance of the Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement at the Second Vatican Council, formal ecumenism has experienced a significant energy-drain over the past decade or so and has frequently found itself in a place of apparent impasse. Receptive Ecumenism offers a constructive way forwards – a way of hope – for this context. It continues to hold to and to serve the traditional Faith and Order concern to work for the structural and sacramental unity of the churches whilst also taking our changed situation seriously.

As pioneered in recent years through a series of projects operating out of the Centre for Catholic Studies within Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion, Receptive Ecumenism proceeds by bringing to the fore the dispositions of self-critical hospitality, humble learning, and on-going conversion that have always been quietly essential to good ecumenical work and by turning them into the explicit required strategy and core task of contemporary ecumenism.

At the heart of Receptive Ecumenism is the conviction that further substantial progress is indeed possible on the way towards full structural and sacramental unity but only if a fundamental, counter-instinctual move is made away from traditions wishing that others could be more like themselves to instead each asking what they can and must learn, with dynamic integrity, from their respective others.

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<sup>1</sup> As regards how to translate 'Receptive Ecumenism' into German: a literal translation might be 'aufnahmebereiter ökumenischer Dialog'; a looser translation, focussed on the basic value at work in Receptive Ecumenism, might be 'Lernbereitschaft im ökumenischen Dialog'. I am grateful to my Durham colleague, Dr Dorothee Bertschmann, for these suggestions. For her own part the practice of Prof. Myriam Wijlens of the University of Erfurt is either to stick with the English phrase or to use a phrase such as 'Rezipierende Ökumene' or 'Rezeptiver Ökumenismus' in order to retain a clear and close connection with the semi-technical notion of theological/ecumenical reception.

This required receptive ecclesial learning is envisaged as operating not only in relation to such things as hymnody, spirituality, and devotional practices but as extending to doctrinal self-understanding and, even more so, respective structural and organisational-cultural realities.

As such, Receptive Ecumenism represents a way of ecumenical ecclesial conversion and growth that is both remarkably simple in vision and remarkably far-reaching in potential. It is offered here as the way that the Spirit is today calling the churches to walk for the sake of their own greater flourishing in and witness to communion in God.

### **The Key Principles and Core Values of Receptive Ecumenism**

- As called forth and held within the Trinitarian communion of God, the churches are called to grow ever more deeply and visibly together in this communion and to come to express the union-in-relation it implies in appropriate structural and sacramental unity.
- “Life and Works” ecumenism – doing things together – whilst absolutely vital, can never be enough.
- Whilst always in need of testing by the “head” – by critical theological scrutiny – all effective receptive ecumenical learning consists most deeply in an affair of the “heart”, as a matter of being attracted by, even falling in love with, the grace-filled beauty in another tradition and being impelled to move towards this even at cost.
- The authentic Spirit-led vitality of Christian life and tradition consists not in steadfast identical repetition but in the preparedness to return to our core calling and to ask what fresh performances of this, with dynamic integrity, are appropriate to the specific challenges and opportunities of our times and contexts.
- The integrity of traditions consists not merely in doing the same things in different ways and different locations but in doing, as required, genuinely fresh things in familiar or recognisably coherent ways.
- We need to resist exclusively past-oriented views of tradition and exclusively problem-solving understandings of the ecumenical task relative to such past articulations and to engage also future-oriented understandings of the tradition as all it is and might be relative to the saving purposes of God in Christ and the Spirit.
- Traditions are better conceived as dynamic webs than as inflexible structures.
- Our traditions are limited as well as life giving, wounded as well as grace-bearing: we need to show rather than to hide our wounds and to ask our others to minister to us.
- The openness to growth, change, examination of conscience and continual grace-filled conversion that lies at the heart of Christian life pertains as much to the ecclesial as to the personal: to

allowing, that is, one's own tradition to be challenged to expand and to re-think how it understands and does things in relation to specific issues.

- This due emphasis on the ecclesial dimension of conversion needs to extend beyond the doctrinal-theoretical alone to include also the organisational, the structural, the cultural, and the broadly practical.
- Truth is ultimately something lived and not simply something thought.
- Whether personal or ecclesial, the call to conversion requires to be lived through attentive hospitality to the truth of the other in specific circumstances.
- In this regard it must be remembered that Christian living and ecclesial existence is not a “zero-sum” game in the sense that the call to graced conversion is always the call to greater life and flourishing, never, fundamentally, to diminishment.
- Consequently, rather than worrying unduly about what learning others may need to do, each should take responsibility for their own learning, mindful of the adage that “We cannot change others, we can only change ourselves but changing ourselves will enable change in others”.
- With this, receptive ecumenical learning requires a move away from the presupposition of mutuality – “we’ll move if you move” – to the embrace of a certain unilateral willingness to walk the path of ecclesial conversion for the sake of the greater flourishing one’s own tradition’s and regardless, to some extent, of whether others are also currently prepared so to do.
- The primary aim is not the promotion of increased mutual understanding and appreciation *between* traditions but of continuing ecclesial conversion, deepening and expansive growth *within* traditions.
- Throughout, it must always be remembered that progress towards our ecumenical goal is fundamentally God’s work and calling into which we are being drawn rather than any merely human project of our own creation, possession and control.
- Living this requires *both* active trust that we *are* being resourced for this and led into it in the ways that we require *and* patient recognition that any real receptive ecclesial learning necessarily takes time to be realised.
- As such, the ecumenical scene is best viewed not simply as a problem-strewn field but as one of open possibilities, across which the only path is one of long, slow learning into greater life and maturity – this is not a second-best accommodation compared with a supposedly alternative faster route but the only route possible, the golden highway.
- The time we have is a time of grace and time for the eventual unfolding and present anticipating of God’s success, not a time of irredeemable failure.
- The fact that some problems and differences can now appear insuperable does not mean that they will always so appear.
- We must neither give up on the God-given calling to be one, nor allow it to mutate into merely getting along with each other but rather seek to live courageously and imaginatively in hope.

- We need to “lean-into” the promise of God’s purpose and the presence of God’s Spirit and to ask what it means in practice for us to enter into this more fully in the here and now.
- We are changed by love not by anger and if we are in turn to effect creative ecclesial change then it must be through the sustained passion of love rather than frustration: “By love alone” the way of ecclesial transformation.

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