

# **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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## *Introduction*

Many thanks Prof. Kelly for that gracious introduction and for inviting me to visit this esteemed Institute, something I have wanted to do for some time. I bring greetings from my colleagues within the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University and am delighted that our two institutions are exploring how they might work together for mutual benefit, in service of the mission of the church in theological research, education, and formation. Last year we were honoured to host your Vice-President, Dr. Christiaan Alting von Geusau, and just last week Dr Vincent DeMeo was also with us. So it is very good to make a return visit. The International Theological Institute is a beacon of excellence in Catholic theological education and formation: a fitting tribute to the theological vision and courageous ecclesial leadership of your founding Grand Chancellor, His Eminence Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, OP. We in Durham are very much hoping that His Eminence will be able to accept our invitation to present our prestigious Bishop Dunn Memorial Lecture in November 2015. In the meantime, it gives me great pleasure to be able to dedicate this lecture in honour of His Eminence.

In this season of celebrations for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vatican II, almost 50 years to the day since the promulgation of its Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, I have been asked to speak on the Catholic ecumenical vision at work in a fresh strategy for contemporary ecumenical engagement that we have pioneered at Durham and which over the past decade has attracted considerable international attention in both academic and ecclesial contexts, including within the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. We

have been calling this approach Receptive Ecumenism.<sup>1</sup> So, developed and presented as an explicit, formal strategy, there *is* a freshness about Receptive Ecumenism. That said, as we shall see this evening, viewed in another way it also, to some degree, what William James would refer to as ‘a new name for some old ways of thinking’.

Receptive Ecumenism seeks to take two apparently contradictory things equally seriously: first, clear recognition as to the reality and challenges of the contemporary ecumenical moment, wherein the hope for structural unification in the short-medium term is now widely recognised as being unrealistic; second, equally clear recognition as to the abiding need for the Christian churches precisely in this situation to find an appropriate means of continuing to walk the way of conversion towards more visible structural and sacramental unity. The central aim, then, of Receptive Ecumenism is to seek after an appropriate ecumenical ethic and strategy for living between the times; for living now oriented upon the promise and calling to being made one in the Trinitarian life of God.

In service of this aim Receptive Ecumenism represents a remarkably simple but far-reaching strategy which draws-out the dispositions of self-critical hospitality, humble learning, and on-going conversion that have always been quietly essential in all good ecumenical encounter and seeks now to place them centre-stage as an explicit strategy or organising principle for contemporary ecumenism. This principle is basically that considerable further progress is indeed possible but only if each of the traditions, both singly and jointly, makes a clear, programmatic shift from wishing that others could be more like themselves to instead asking what they can and must learn, with dynamic integrity, from their respective others.

Now the conviction is that this receptive ecumenical mode of proceeding is of relevance for all of the traditions. That said, it is notable that Receptive Ecumenism has come to explicit articulation in a Catholic context; and there is no coincidence here. For as this evening’s lecture will argue Receptive Ecumenism has deep roots in and resonance with an authentically Catholic understanding and practice of ecumenism. The lecture is accordingly in

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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.

four parts: first, I reflect on what it means for us to commemorate Vatican II; second, I will review some of the key insights at work in UR, noting as we do how they were later reinforced and developed by Blessed Pope John Paul II; third, I explore the theological vision and strategic intent of Receptive Ecumenism, again noting clear precedent in and resonance with John Paul II's ecumenical teaching; finally, I will further underline the authentic catholicity of Receptive Ecumenism by noting similar clear accord with the respective ecumenical teaching both of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, whilst Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and most clearly now with that of His Holiness Pope Francis.

In short, the argument will be that that which has been long incubated within the ecumenical movement has now come of age and needs to be given its rein and put to work for: firstly the flourishing of Catholicism's own catholicity; and with that the furtherance of the common ecumenical pilgrimage; and, in turn, the quality, integrity, and appeal of the church's witnessing to the world.

### *I. On celebrating Vatican II well: remembrance and anticipation*

What does it mean for us to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vatican II? For those who lived through it, it was *the* defining Catholic experience of their lives, whether through enthusiastic embrace or aggrieved reaction. For enthusiasts this act of remembering can have something of mourning and protest about it: mourning for a perceived eclipsing of the great work of Vatican II; protest that things should be otherwise. For others, however, making memory is an act of necessary reinterpretation; of seeking to reclaim the Council from what they regard as distorting and dangerous novelty. Here Pope Benedict's careful balancing of the language of reform *and* continuity in relation to the Council is significant and reminds us that the duality of continuity and change is properly of the essence of Christian tradition, which genuinely *is* the dynamism and fidelity of the Spirit in the church.

Well, if we can ask the general question as to what it means to celebrate Vatican II, all the more so can we ask this of UR: what does it mean at this point in church history to be celebrating one of the defining impulses to the ecumenical story, for some it represents all that was right about the Council; for others all that was wrong? For the enthusiasts Vatican II opened the golden age of modern ecumenism, marked by what now seems to have been the overly optimistic expectation that it would be possible within a generation to overcome all the historic divisions between the traditions and so achieve a structurally and sacramentally united church as an 'actual possibility' (*reale Möglichkeit*). The great bilateral dialogues

were established to serve that very goal and for quite some time all the indications seemed remarkably positive. Take the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) and the Catholic – Lutheran dialogues as examples: through a combination of clarifying misunderstandings, drawing on recent scholarship, and viewing differing theological frameworks as potentially complementary rather than opposed, one historic point of division after another seemed to render itself as no longer necessarily communion-dividing.

In contrast, ours are difficult times for formal, institutional ecumenism. Not only have some of the classical issues around authority and decision-making proven more intractable than imagined, new issues have arisen, at the formal level at least, concerning significantly different views in relation to such things as women's ordination and the pastoral care of people of homosexual orientation. Such real differences at the formal level do not lend themselves to being explained away, as the classical bilateral strategies would typically do, as legitimately diverse ways of articulating the same basic position. As consequence, there is a widespread energy-drain around formal ecumenism and a sense of frustrated disappointment. The wave of ecumenical optimism flowing from Vatican II appears beached, its energy spent.

What does it mean that the barque of the church is passing through such challenging waters? How is it that this 'sacrament ... of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race' (*LG 1*) is not of one mind, never mind one body? Well, in part at least, it simply means that the church is a living, breathing, organic reality and not simply an ideal on a page! Disagreement, difficulty and tension are normal in the experience of the church, as in society. Grace, the movement of the Spirit in the life of the church, is not about the eradication of difficulty and the achievement of an easy uniformity but about the church being held, even deepened, in communion in and through such differences and difficulties. Viewed in this way, the barque of the church is rightly in mid-stream; neither the starting point, nor the conclusion of its own story but in its midst: both remembering and anticipating the one who as Alpha and Omega, Emmanuel, God with us, is re-*member*-ing us and drawing us into the fullness of communion.

The fourth Gospel has a wonderful pair of narratives in ch's 6 and 21 which bring this home: the first about Jesus coming to the disciples on the Lake in troubled conditions, the second about the disciples coming to shore to find the risen Jesus already there, preparing breakfast. Christ, the one in and through whom all was called into being, this Christ has already passed over through disappointment, even death, and is the one who always already awaits us, calling us forth. Remembering well in relation to UR is about a calling forwards as well as recalling backwards.

## *II. On the Catholic ecumenical significance of Vatican II*

Whilst dichotomous contrasts between pre-conciliar and post-conciliar Catholicism can be unhelpfully overplayed, in the case of Catholic ecumenical teaching it is right to remind ourselves of the contrast. In the face of the rise of the modern ecumenical movement, the 1917 Code of Canon Law had forbid Catholics from participating in meetings with other Christians, let alone from sharing in their rituals. As articulated most clearly in Pope Pius XI's 1928 encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, 'On Fostering Religious Union', the mindset was that the one true Church of Christ is to be straightforwardly and exclusively identified with the Catholic Church and that any such association with other Christians would suggest a false equivalence. The only way forward was that of unidirectional return to Rome. The contrast both of tone and content could not be clearer when compared with UR and LG.

Relinquishing the attitude of one-sided fault, Catholicism's complicity in the breaks of the sixteenth century is acknowledged (UR 3) and recognition given that 'very many of the significant elements and endowments which together ... give life to the Church ... can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.' (UR 3). The implication is drawn: 'To the extent that these elements are found in other Christian communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them' (UR 3). Furthermore, these ecclesial elements are regarded as being of significance for the Catholic Church itself and not simply for the other traditions. Most pointedly so it is recognised that some of these ecclesial elements may have come to fuller flower in the other traditions than they have been able so to do within Catholicism: 'Whatever is truly Christian ... can always bring a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church.' (UR 4)

John Paul II later underlined this in his remarkable 1995 encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (UUS), referring to other Christian communities as places 'where certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasized' (UUS 14); a point he stressed even more clearly in a personal capacity in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, where we find him speculating that for all the implication of human sin in ecclesial divisions and for all the need for these divisions to be reconciled, they may nevertheless have been allowed for in the providence God precisely so that the characteristic gifts and charisms of the various traditions might each come to clearer prominence than historically they were able to do in the undivided church.

These lines of understanding combine in *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Lumen Gentium* with an emphasis on Catholicism's own need to learn, to be renewed, purified and even reformed. For example UR 6 speaks of ecumenism as a 'renewal' (*renovatio*) and a 'continual reformation' (*perennis reformation*) and, similarly, LG 8 speaks of the church as being in a state of '*semper purificanda*', of always being purified. Sure, communion with the Bishop of Rome continues here to be viewed as an essential aspect of the unity of the church such that, as the famous *subsistit in* clause of LG 8 articulates, all the essential elements of the Church of Christ can be uniquely claimed to be present together in the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, this is no longer ecumenism conceived simply as a call to one-sided return but of growth on both sides and mutual journeying to a new relationship. The implication is that communion with the Bishop of Rome is one thing but communion with the Bishop of Rome as currently structured within Catholicism is quite another. As UR 4 puts it: 'Their (Catholics) primary duty is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done or renewed in the Catholic household itself'. This Vatican II call to put one's own house in order resonates strongly with one of the central themes of the current papacy. So let us turn now to ask what it means in this winter of ecumenical discontent for us to seek to live into Vatican II's ecumenical vision?

### *III. Receptive Ecumenism in service of Vatican II's Catholic ecumenical vision*

As already noted, in contrast to the heady years following Vatican II, ours are difficult times for formal, institutional ecumenism: by which I mean the kind that still aims at working towards full reconciled communion. Many have grown impatient and downsized the ecumenical goal to seeking simply to get along and do as many good things together as possible: if you like, Life and Works ecumenism *instead of* Faith and Order ecumenism rather than as necessary correlates. But whilst such things as shared prayer and witness are as crucial to ecumenism as oxygen to life, no matter how much getting along with each other and doing good things together we have, they alone are never going to solve the ecumenical problem, which in Catholic understanding is to do with the broken sign-value we give of our communion in diversity in the Trinitarian life of God. For this, the aspiration of formal institutional ecumenism remains basic. But it is this very aspiration which is now so difficult to pursue in any meaningful way – at least as we have thus far done.

In this apparent cul-de-sac we need to remind ourselves of some basics. First is that the Spirit of Jesus Christ can be trusted not to drive us into blind corners in order to prod us with a stick: if the call to full structural and sacramental communion really is a Gospel imperative, a constant, then so also will the Lord's resourcing of the churches to live this imperative be constant. The context and the challenges it entails might be different; previous strategies and resources might no longer be adequate, at least at this juncture; but fresh strategies and resources there most surely will be. Our task is to seek to discern them and to live them with courage, creativity, and fidelity.

Second is that unlike optimism, authentic Christian hope is not a form of reality-denial. Christian hope, as Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, takes reality in all its starkness radically seriously, even into and through disappointment and death; knowing that our role is not to be the architects and sole-producers of a future that is not yet but to be its servants. Our role is to anticipate this "now-but-not-yet" future of which we can get glimpse and foretaste and to ask ourselves what it means to live it in the present; what it means for us to be conformed to that which we glimpse and taste so that we can grow more fully into it; what it means for us to "lean-into" the presence of the Spirit who is this sure foretaste and down-payment so that we can be held, set on our feet, impelled to action, called to conversion, and made living witnesses to this future in the here and now in ways that will both take us towards it and inspire others also so to travel.

A few minutes ago I suggested that UR's central contribution was to present Catholic ecumenical *learning* (as distinct from teaching!) as a means whereby Catholicism could itself hear the call to continuing conversion and renewal and so grow more fully into what Catholicism most deeply already is. In *Ut Unum Sint* John Paul II again gives us a remarkable witness to this reversal by extending an invitation to theologians and leaders of other Christian traditions to help re-imagine the way in which the papacy itself operates so that it might once again become the focus for Christian unity rather than the continuing cause of division it currently is. Here we have clear, prophetic expression of the imaginative commitment to the continuing conversion of one's own tradition that is now required if the Christian churches really are to progress beyond friendship to the full catholicity of the one Church of Christ. And as for individuals so also for institutions, it can take time for us to grow into living in accordance with our deepest insights.

More generally, it is this basic Vatican II-inspired ecumenical approach, of focussing on one's own tradition's need for conversion, which in recent years has been formally developed and explicitly offered as a fresh strategy and way for contemporary ecumenism

under the title Receptive Ecumenism. Unlike much contemporary ecumenical practice, Receptive Ecumenism does not foreclose the traditional Faith and Order concern to work for the structural and sacramental unity of the churches and settle for something less. Rather, in tune with Catholic teaching, Receptive Ecumenism maintains the abiding importance of this goal and seeks to serve it constructively whilst also taking the changed challenges absolutely seriously.

At the heart of Receptive Ecumenism is the basic conviction that further substantial progress is indeed possible 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. There is a John F. Kennedy-style reversal at work: “Ask not what your ecumenical others must learn from you. Ask rather what you must learn from your ecumenical others.” 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 can be viewed as taking the evangelical call to growth and conversion and applying it to the institutional, structural, and formal ecclesial dimensions of Christian existence and not just, as more commonly, the individual and personal dimensions.

In this perspective, each tradition is called to take responsibility for its own required learning rather than to wait on others to do likewise; and to take this responsibility in the first instance for the sake of its own greater flourishing. The principle is that for all the many particular gifts and strengths to be found in each tradition, each also variously falls short of the glory of God; each has specific characteristic difficulties and limitations, open wounds in need of healing, that can be highly resistant to resolution from within the tradition’s existing resources. Seeking to resolve such long-term difficulties using existing internal resources alone is like a hamster running on a wheel: there might be a sense of movement but no real progress is being made. On the contrary, the existing logic is simply being reinforced. There is need for refreshment and renewal from without; from the best discernible practice, alternative logics, and ecclesial experiences of other traditions. This has the prospect of being a dynamic process that will take each tradition to new places – in the first instance for their own health and flourishing but in such fashion as will also open-up fresh possibilities, currently unforeseeable, for their relating to each other.

The general tendency, of course, is to seek to hide such wounds; particularly from those outside the family circle. Consequently, too much ecumenical engagement is a matter of

“getting the best china tea-service” out: of showing ourselves in the best possible light to our distant relatives who are coming to visit rather than allowing the more “warts-and-all” self-understanding we keep locked behind the closed doors of the intimate family space to come into view. Rather than the ecumenism of the “best china”, Receptive Ecumenism represents an ecumenism of the “wounded hands”: of being prepared to show our wounds to each other, knowing that we cannot heal or save ourselves; knowing that we need to be ministered to in our need from another’s gift and grace; and trusting that as in the Risen Lord in whose ecclesial body these wounds exist, they can become sites of our redemption, jewels of transformed ecclesial existence. By so doing Receptive Ecumenism forsakes the aspiration for a programmed step-by-step journey to a foreseeable destination and embraces instead a less defined but more fundamental programme of conversion that will take each tradition to a fresh place wherein new things become possible; new places, moreover, that involve each tradition becoming more fully rather than less what it most deeply already is.

In terms of what all of this might mean in practice, it is highly significant that the third major phase of the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission, ARCIC III, has explicitly embraced Receptive Ecumenism as a key facet of its methodology. It is significant also that ARCIC III has been tasked precisely with engaging such difficult issues as authority and decision-making at local and universal levels of the church. For the Roman Catholic members of the Commission this will involve exploring how matters such as Papacy, collegiality, ecclesial subsidiarity, and lay participation in decision-making can each be appropriately renewed, reformed, and expanded in service of a fuller and deeper catholicity through appropriate learning from Anglicanism. As to what Anglicanism equally might have to learn from Catholicism, that is for the Anglican members to ask and for the Catholic members to be prepared to support as desired and required.

In proceeding in this way ARCIC III is making no claim to being able finally to overcome in any programmed way the deep meta-differences in decision-making structures and processes *between* Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism. That would be utterly unrealistic. What it is seeking to do, however, is to focus honestly on respective difficulties *within* the traditions as these arise in the experience of the concrete church and to make some kind of progress, albeit more modest than once hoped for. But this is being done in the conviction that any such progress and change *within* the traditions will, in turn, open significant fresh possibilities for working towards reconciliation *between* the traditions by each tradition learning something from the other. Whilst this will never result in the two traditions appearing identical, they might each grow to becoming more recognisable to each

other in a familial kind of way whilst also retaining their distinctive personality traits. By so doing they might each arrive at a place of recognising themselves in the other, the other in themselves, and as each being bound together in the fullness of Christ and the Spirit.

*Conclusion: the timeliness of Receptive Ecumenism in the context of the two most recent papacies*

Starting out with reflections on what it means to celebrate well the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vatican II, this lecture has focussed on uncovering the Catholic roots of Receptive Ecumenism and presenting it as an authentically Catholic calling. This can be underlined and the timeliness of Receptive Ecumenism emphasised by indicating the further significant resonance with both the long-term ecumenical thinking of the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and the freshly emphasised teaching of the now Pope Francis. For all the significant differences of style and tone between the two most recent papacies – between prudence and parrhesia; between a concern for integrity and an openness to self-criticism; between a call for active trust in God’s providence and an emphasis on the urgency of response to the call of God in the specifics of time and place – there is deep complementarity between their respective ecumenical visions; as there is also with that at work in Receptive Ecumenism – hardly surprising, perhaps, given that each is variously shaped in accordance with the fresh springs of Vatican II.

Most significant here for present purposes in Joseph Ratzinger’s writings – and also, perhaps, most surprising – is his emphasis in his 1986 open ‘letter’ to the editor of the *Tübinger Theologische Quartalschrift* on the need ‘to accept what is fruitful in these divisions ... to receive precisely the positive element from this diversity ... in the hope that finally the division will cease to be a division at all and is merely a polarity without opposition.’ All the more is this the case when he turns to reflect on what this might actually mean in practice: ‘Here it would therefore be a question of continually learning afresh from the other as other while respecting his or her otherness.’ Again, touching on a similar theme in his 1995 essay, ‘On the Ecumenical Situation’, he even notes that this needs to take priority over insistently seeking to teach the other.

Equally, for all this remarkable resonance with the core principle of Receptive Ecumenism, we do not find either in the writings of Joseph Ratzinger or in the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI many, if any, examples of these principles actually being turned into an intentional practical strategy for receptive ecclesial renewal; any more than we do either in the Vatican II texts or in the papacy of Pope John Paul II. The call to transformative Catholic

learning through receptive ecumenical engagement here remains a work of creative, even prophetic, composition but not yet lively performance. Indeed throughout the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI the tendency was for these internal tensions within Catholicism to be institutionally suppressed, with emphasis being placed instead on the church's external challenges and the need for internal discipline and unity if they are to be met.

The election of Pope Francis and his words and initiatives have, by contrast, removed the taint of disloyalty from the recognition that the time has come for we in the Catholic Church to put our own house in order *ad intra* if we are to speak and witness with any credibility *ad extra*. That this time of Catholic conversion might be also pursued via the way of Receptive Ecumenism is suggested by Pope Francis's own words, both in various sections of *Evangelii Gaudium* (particularly §246) and by his Wednesday morning exhortation during this year's Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity when he said:

It is good to acknowledge the grace with which God blesses us and, even more so, to find in other Christians something of which we are in need, something that we can receive as a gift from our brothers and our sisters. The Canadian group that prepared the prayers for this Week of Prayer has not invited the communities to think about what they can give their Christian neighbours, but has exhorted them to meet to understand what all can receive from time to time from the others. This requires something more. It requires much prayer, humility, reflection and constant conversion. Let us go forward on this path, praying for the unity of Christians, so that this scandal may cease and be no longer with us.

If Receptive Ecumenism, in joint accord with Blessed Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Benedict XVI, helps us to read *Unitatis redintegratio* aright and relative to the ecumenical and ecclesial moment in which we now find ourselves, it is to be urgently hoped that His Holiness Pope Francis will now help Catholicism to live it aright for the tri-fold sake of the health of Catholicism, the furthering of the ecumenical journey, and the quality of our witness to the world in both act and ecclesial reality. Amen and Thankyou.