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## **EDITORIAL**

The global Covid-19 pandemic led to much disruption on every level of society in the years 2020–2023, and neither ecumenists nor editors were exempt. We are delighted, then, to at last be able to complete Volume 56 of *ONE IN CHRIST* and apologise once again for the delay.

This issue presents a number of articles considering contemporary matters yet looking both to the past and towards the future. Browne opens with an overview of the current dynamics in international ecumenical relations and presents a vision for the future, while Papanikolaou and Scherle explore the fields of politics and ecology in a theological light. The two articles by Gervin and +Johannesson show how study of theological and spiritual writings can be fruitful for ecumenical rapprochement and learning, in this case between Lutherans and Catholics.

Also concerned with spiritual writings, and here with texts pre-dating the great divisions of the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, are the two articles on the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Metropolitan Job and Russell) from the international ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality held in Bose in September 2023. This conference, as explained by Br Guido of Bose, is meant to be ‘a place of encounter, fraternal exchange and free discussion between Christians belonging to all confessions [...] an opportunity [...] to return together to the common sources of faith and spiritual life’. We publish these two papers convinced that such listening together to common sources is an important part of the ecumenical endeavour.

Looking to the not-so-distant past, Pierce considers the background and legacy of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, while a new beginning is highlighted in the interview with Brother Matthew, the new Prior of Taizé.

For *ONE IN CHRIST* too, a new phase begins, as the baton of editorship has been passed. The Editorial Board wishes to express its sincere gratitude to Sr Emmanuelle Billoteau for the years she served as editor of the review, and welcome Sr Ingeborg-Marie Kvam OP, of the Monastery of the Annunciation (Lunden kloster) in Oslo, Norway, as new editor.

## ECUMENICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN A SYNODAL CHURCH: ROME AND THE OTHER CHURCHES TODAY

**Martin Browne OSB\***

*This article presents recent ecumenical events related especially to the First Session of the Synod on Synodality in 2023, gives an overview of the current state of official dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and other denominations, and presents a vision for the future. Originally given as an address on the occasion of the thirty-third meeting of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting in Dromantine in October 2023, the text has been adapted to suit a written format.*

In 2023, a number of ecumenical anniversaries were marked in Ireland. The Irish Council of Churches marked one hundred years of existence and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, which brings the Roman Catholic Church into dialogue with the ICC, marked fifty years since the first such meeting. While remaining legally separate, the ICC and the Catholic Church are now able to present themselves under the single banner of *Churches in Ireland: Connecting in Christ*, a very welcome development. That the first encounters carried such a bluntly factual and prosaic title as the 'Ballymascanlon Talks' suggests a certain *ad hoc* nature to them, as if participants were simply meeting, without any plan that the meetings would evolve into a more formal enduring ecumenical instrument. We can give thanks that they evolved into the Irish Inter-Church Meeting and have in fact continued for the past half-century. Two other anniversaries in 2023 worth taking note of are the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement and the tenth anniversary of the publication of the World Council of Churches convergence text, *The Church: Towards A Common Vision* (TCTCV).

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I mention the Good Friday Agreement because ecumenical relations in Ireland were for many years, to a large extent, almost entirely bound up with the political situation in Northern Ireland. As the then co-chairs of the IICM put it, on the occasion of the meeting's twenty-fifth anniversary: "The story of ecumenism in Ireland has been intertwined with that of "The Troubles" over the last twenty-five years, particularly in Northern Ireland".<sup>1</sup> While the formation of what was to become the Irish Council of Churches had the burgeoning post-1910 inter-Protestant focus on united mission as its background music, the Inter-Church Meeting began against the backdrop of political and sectarian strife in Northern Ireland. The relative though incomplete peace experienced since the Good Friday Agreement surely places ecumenical relationships on this island in a new context now. Reconciliation work of various types is still, of course, needed, but perhaps the relative peace of the past quarter-century can make it easier for churches to relate to one another more clearly as ecumenical partners now, and less as reflections of the deep divisions among the people of the island. The growing diversity of the ecclesial landscape in Ireland can also contribute to this 'normalisation' of ecumenism in Ireland—pre-1998 Northern Ireland being largely unknown to some of ICC's newer member churches—but the more or less peaceful state of the north-eastern part of the island sealed by the Belfast Agreement has surely changed Ireland's ecumenical landscape.

### **Ecumenical Events in Rome**

In September 2023, the Church Leaders Group (Ireland) visited Rome, to mark the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. The existence of this group is probably also a by-product of our troubled history, but it is a most welcome one, even in our less troubled present. There were many elements to the group's visit to Rome, but I was particularly struck by the ecumenical Service of the Word on the first morning of the visit. The President of the ICC, the Methodist President, the Presbyterian Moderator and the Anglican and Roman Catholic Primates, leading a service together is a notable event anywhere, but even more when they do so in Rome, and more notable still when they do so in a place of worship belonging to the Waldensian Evangelical Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Irish Inter-Church Meeting, *The Irish Inter-Church Meeting: Background and Development* (1998), 1.

A Waldensian temple was a most appropriate place in which to pray together for continuing reconciliation. Now part of the Reformed family of churches, as a Christian community the Waldensians pre-date the Reformation by several hundred years. They suffered discrimination and serious persecution at the hands of Catholics down the centuries—including a shocking call by Pope Innocent VIII in 1487 for their extermination. Relationships between the majority church and this small Protestant minority in Italy, understandably, remained very poor for a very long time, and many wounds and many memories in need of reconciliation remain. This complex history made it particularly poignant that a Waldensian sanctuary was the venue for the Irish Church Leaders Group service.

Meetings and statements of the Irish Church Leaders Group are so long-established now as to be unremarkable, thank God, but a joint church service, in Rome, focusing on Peace, Hope and Love, where the church leaders themselves led the whole thing, was truly remarkable and very beautiful indeed. The focus may have been political and social reconciliation in Ireland, but the medium was very much a powerful ecumenical moment.

Two days later, I participated in one of the most remarkable ecumenical prayer gatherings ever. Thousands of people, in St Peter's Square, praying together on the eve of the opening of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Praying *for* the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The Pope was not the only one seated in a big chair on the platform. He was joined by the widest variety of Christian leaders that I have ever seen at an event in Rome. It was extraordinary—leaders from across the Christian spectrum, coming together with the Bishop of Rome, to pray God's blessing on a synod of the Church of Rome. It is worth listing the leaders present:

- From the Orthodox Church: The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and personal representatives of the Orthodox Patriarchs of Alexandria, Serbia and Romania;
- From the Oriental Orthodox Churches: The Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch; the personal representative of the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, and representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church;

- From the Western Communions: The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Secretary-General of the Lutheran World Federation, the Primate of the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, the President of the World Methodist Council and a representative of the Waldensian Church;
- From the Evangelical, Pentecostal and Ecumenical Bodies: The President of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the General Secretaries of the World Baptist Alliance and the World Evangelical Alliance, and the personal representative of the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.

They entered together, led by Pope Francis in his wheelchair. Before the vigil began, they paused in prayer before the Cross of San Damiano, the image before which Saint Francis was praying when he heard the call to ‘rebuild my church’.

We read and talk a lot about communion or *koinonia* in ecumenical circles, but this was surely a glimpse of communion without precedent. The leaders of Christianity, praying together before the Cross where the most beloved of saints heard the call to restore and rebuild what was broken and divided. There were not very many words spoken during the service, although each of the people I have just mentioned did a reading or led a prayer. Instead, as happens in the ecumenical Community of Taizé, there were simple repetitive chants, scripture readings with the key phrases repeated in several languages, and intercessions in litany form. Also as in Taizé, there was an extended silence after the Gospel. It truly was extraordinary. Just imagine it! 16,000 people, reflecting on God’s word together in silence for a whole five minutes. There was hardly any muttering or shuffling or coughing anywhere in the Piazza; just deep silence. Here too, profound communion was palpable.

However, it was the final moment that took my breath away. The Pope and all the church leaders I mentioned—including the Waldensian Pastor who had welcomed the Irish Church Leaders Group two days before—faced the enormous crowd, and prayed the final blessing together. Some prayed in English, some in Italian, but all prayed the blessing together nonetheless. Some made the sign of the Cross over the crowd, some did not, but all prayed the blessing together nonetheless.

## Synodality, Primacy and Ecumenical Exchange of Gifts

It is clear that moments of communion are just that—moments—and it is also clear that unity is a lot more than having church leaders doing occasional carefully choreographed set piece events together. However, surely this amazing gathering, the culmination of a day of events with the disarmingly simple title of *Together*, says something about where we are on our ecumenical journey? The vigil grew from a suggestion by Br Alois, the then Prior of the Community of Taizé, but it is significant that the Pope was willing to invite such a wide array of Christian leaders, and it is significant too that so many of them were willing to come. To come and pray, together—*cum Petro* if not *sub Petro*—for the work of the Catholic Synod.

It is worth recalling that the WCC convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, summarises a lot of discussion from various bilateral and multilateral dialogues, as well as Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order regarding a universal ministry of Christian Unity, saying:

In subsequent discussion, despite continuing areas of disagreement, some members of other churches have expressed an openness to considering how such a ministry might foster the unity of local churches throughout the world and promote, not endanger, the distinctive features of their witness.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, I was very struck by an interview given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, after the vigil. Speaking of his personal regard for Pope Francis, he said, 'he is someone I pray for every day, whom I love dearly, in whom I find a wisdom that is both reassuring and deeply encouraging'. Reflecting on the experience of that ecumenical prayer in St Peter's Square, he continued, 'in the vigil on the Saturday evening, with the widest group of churches one can imagine, from all parts of Orthodoxy to Pentecostal and everything between—I think I saw most clearly the Pope in his role as universal Primate'.<sup>3</sup> It was a striking contribution to the ongoing discussion of the role of the Petrine primacy as the churches continue to, as the World Council of Churches puts it:

call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through

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<sup>2</sup> World Council of Churches, *The Church Towards A Common Vision* (2013), §56.

<sup>3</sup> Interview in *The Church Times*, 13 October 2023.



witness and service to the world, and advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.<sup>4</sup>

At the Synod General Assembly, for which that vigil served as preparation, there were twelve Fraternal Delegates. As at the vigil, they came from a wide variety of Christian traditions: The Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Anglican Communion, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance and the Disciples of Christ. They were not present merely as observers, or messengers bringing fraternal greetings, but as participants, in both the plenary sessions and the small groups.

The current synodal journey, from the very beginning of its planning, has had a more explicitly ecumenical dimension than any of the previous meetings since Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops in 1965. The Preparatory Document stated very clearly that ‘the dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey’.<sup>5</sup> Underlining this position, as local churches around the world began what may have been the most extensive listening and consultation process ever, the Secretary General of the Synod and the Prefect of our Dicastery, Cardinals Mario Grech and Kurt Koch, wrote a joint letter to all the bishops’ conferences of the world about the ecumenical dimension of the Synod. They could not have been clearer.

Both synodality and ecumenism are processes of ‘walking together’. Firstly, if ‘a synodal Church is a Church which listens’ (Pope Francis, 17 October 2015), this listening should concern the totality of those who are honoured by the name of Christian, since all the baptised participate to some degree in the *sensus fidei* (cf. International Theological Commission, *Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church*, §56). Secondly, as ecumenism can be understood as an ‘exchange of gifts’, one of the gifts Catholics can receive from the other Christians is precisely their experience and understanding of synodality (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, §246). Thirdly, the synodal shaping of the Catholic Church at all levels has significant ecumenical implications as it makes it a more credible dialogue partner. Finally, the synodal process itself is an opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup> World Council of Churches, *Commission on Faith and Order Bylaws* (2012).

<sup>5</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *Synod 2021-2023 [sic] Preparatory Document* (2021), 36.

further foster ecumenical relationships at all levels of the Church, since the participation of ecumenical delegates has become the customary practice, not only in the Synod of Bishops, but also in diocesan synods.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of ‘exchange of gifts’ mentioned by the cardinals has become a very significant and fruitful one in ecumenical engagement. Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church taught, with reference to the different parts of the Catholic Church, that ‘each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church’.<sup>7</sup> Citing the first Letter of Peter, it underlined the need for Christians to share these gifts: ‘Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received’ (1 Pet. 4:10). Pope John Paul II took this teaching a step further, and in his landmark ecumenical encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, quoting that paragraph from Vatican II, gave it an explicitly ecumenical interpretation: ‘Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an “exchange of gifts”’.<sup>8</sup> This theme has been taken further still by advocates of what is known as ‘receptive ecumenism’, which asks: ‘What, in any given situation, can one’s own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?’<sup>9</sup>

In his first major document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis adopted these themes of exchange of gifts and receptive ecumenism and made them his own. Speaking of the need for Catholics to learn from other Christian traditions, he said: ‘It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.’ And showing that he was thinking about synodality even back then at the start of his pontificate, he added: ‘To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.’<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Rome’s official

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<sup>6</sup> Joint letter of Cardinals Koch and Grech to bishops responsible for ecumenism, 28 October 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), §13.

<sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), §28.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning – Establishing the Agenda,’ in Paul Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (2008), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), §246.

theological dialogue with the Orthodox Church addressed the topic of synodality in its two most recent documents, the Chieti document on *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium*<sup>11</sup>, and the Alexandria Document on *Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today*<sup>12</sup>.

In an attempt to do what the Pope was suggesting about learning more about others' experience of synodality, a series of conferences took place in 2022–2023 in Rome, hosted by the Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum University, under the auspices of the Synod Secretariat and our Dicastery, examining the practice of synodality in other churches. In fact, they went further than trying to learn from our Orthodox brothers and sisters, but from our Anglican, Protestant and Old Catholic brothers and sisters too. There were two large *Listening to the East* conferences, and several *Listening to the West* conferences. Between them, they drew together hundreds of theologians, pastors, church historians and canon lawyers, presenting on the historical, canonical and pastoral dimensions of synodality in their respective traditions. For each church or tradition's set of presentations, there was a Roman Catholic listener, tasked with responding not in critical or analytical mode, but in receptive, learning mode, seeking to identify what Catholics could learn from the experience of synodality in the church or tradition in question. Or, to use Pope Francis's words, seeking to see 'what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us'. All the presentations, together with the Catholic responses, were submitted to the Synod office in advance of the preparation of the working document for the General Assembly of October 2023. It was gratifying, at the main *Listening to the West* conference, to hear the President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Revd Najla Kassab, of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, reporting that she had already participated in listening sessions for the Synod organised by the Catholic churches in Lebanon.

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<sup>11</sup> Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church* (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today* (2023).

These detailed descriptions underline how serious and embedded a part of the current synodal journey of the Catholic Church ecumenism is. It is not just about the choreographed moments in St Peter's Square, but rather is integral to the whole enterprise.

When he received the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East in November 2022, during the exchange of greetings after their moment of shared prayer, Pope Francis underlined this fact:

The journey of synodality undertaken by the Catholic Church is and must be ecumenical, just as the ecumenical journey is synodal. It is my hope that we can pursue, ever more fraternally and concretely, our own *synodos*, our 'common journey', by encountering one another, showing concern for one another, sharing our hopes and struggles and above all, as we have done this morning, our prayer and praise of the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

### **A Hopeful Vision for the Future**

The theme for the anniversary year of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting was 'Our Reconciling Vision of Hope'. Reconciliation has been, and remains, an absolute necessity in our wounded societies, particularly in Northern Ireland. Reconciliation between the churches, who too often have treated one another with suspicion or even hostility, has been, and remains, a necessity in this country. Still I would suggest that a hopeful vision for the future could include a greater and more intentional focus not just on reconciliation but on unity. In their 2021 St Patrick's Day message, the Church Leaders Group repented for having, in the past, 'failed to bring to a fearful and divided society that message of the deeper connection that binds us, despite our different identities, as children of God'.<sup>14</sup> As churches, Christ is that deeper connection that binds us.

Perhaps the hopeful vision for the future can be one of still greater closeness—the unity of Christians. In his address at the anniversary service in St Anne's Cathedral 22 January 2023, Archbishop Eamon Martin quoted the prayer of Jesus, 'that they may be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you' (John 17:21) and reminded those present that this prayer is 'the motivation behind all our working and praying and hoping together as Churches'.<sup>15</sup> He concluded, using suitably

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<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, Address to His Holiness Mar Awa III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, 19 November 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Church Leaders Group (Ireland), *In Christ We Journey Together*, 17 March 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Eamon Martin, Address at Service celebrating ICC Centenary and 50th Anniversary of the Ballymascanlon Talks, 22 January 2023.

synodal language: ‘So let us journey onwards with a reconciling vision of hope, singing together an anthem of “be-longing”: “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:5–6).”’

The two biblical texts which the Archbishop quoted, from John 17 and Ephesians 4, are both cited so frequently in ecumenical contexts that we may be at risk of becoming immune to their power. But we must not let that happen! They are at the core of all ecumenical work—reminding us that the unity of the Church is the Lord’s will and that it is also his gift, already given, but not yet fully realised.

### **The Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and Present Ecumenical Relations**

The Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Bishop Brian Farrell, in a report on the office’s work in 2022, described it as telling:

the story of the efforts of the Dicastery in 2022 to keep alive and operative the irreversible commitment to the ecumenical goal of Christian unity in the Catholic Church; and to build and strengthen relations with other Christians in their Churches and communities on the way to full communion.<sup>16</sup>

The phrase, ‘irreversible commitment to the ecumenical goal of Christian unity’, is really important. No matter how slow the progress may seem, and no matter what new obstacles may appear, the Catholic Church is irreversibly committed to the ecumenical goal of Christian unity. We have already looked in some detail at how this commitment is embedded in the current synodal journey and at the invitation to our brothers and sisters from other traditions to contribute to it, so that we may learn from them and grow. I want to look now at how our Dicastery seeks to manifest that commitment and realise that goal.

When Pope Francis in 2022 reorganised the Roman Curia and gave it a new Constitution, our department, as well as getting a new name, got a very clear role description.

It belongs to the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity to engage in timely ecumenical initiatives and activities, both within the Catholic

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<sup>16</sup> Brian Farrell, ‘Report on the Activities of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity during 2022,’ in *Catholica: Vierteljahresschrift für Ökumenische Theologie* 77:2 (2023), 86–99.

Church and in relations with other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, in order to restore unity among Christians. [...]

It is the task of the Dicastery to implement the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and of the post-conciliar magisterium on ecumenism.<sup>17</sup>

I would now like to offer a kind of *tour d'horizon* of Roman Catholic ecumenical relations at the present time, beginning with the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

### *Catholic–Orthodox and Catholic–Oriental Orthodox Dialogues*

The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches met in February 2023, in Egypt, and began to address aspects of Mariology, the theme for the fourth phase of the dialogue. A document entitled *The Sacraments in the Life of the Church*<sup>18</sup> had been approved at the previous meeting, concluding the third phase. The Catholic–Oriental Orthodox dialogue is making steady progress and the relationships at the highest levels are excellent. The leaders of several of the Oriental Orthodox Churches have recently visited Rome, including the heads of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Coptic Orthodox Church. The last of these, Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, was in Rome for the annual Day of Catholic–Coptic friendship on 10 May 2023, and—uniquely—addressed pilgrims during the weekly General Audience held by Pope Francis. He also celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the Basilica of St John Lateran.

Our Dicastery also organises an annual study visit to Rome for young priests and monks of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The visit is an initiative of the Dicastery to help these young priests and monks to deepen their understanding of the Catholic Church. A reciprocal study visit of Catholic priests to Armenia took place in September 2023.

The Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East finalised a study document on images of the Church in the Syriac and Latin Patristic traditions at its meeting in 2022. By presenting Scriptural images and symbols of the Church as developed by the Latin and Syriac Fathers of the early centuries, the Commission aimed ‘to show that the images of the

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<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022), §142, §143.1.

<sup>18</sup> Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, *The Sacraments in the Life of the Church* (2022).

Church, common to both traditions, although sometimes expressed and understood with different nuances, may help us to find together the foundations of a common ecclesiology.”<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned above, our dialogue with the Orthodox Church is discussing the question of authority and synodality, with special attention to the role of the Bishop of Rome, insofar as the universal role of the Petrine ministry lies at the heart of the difficulties that led to separation between East and West. The 2016 agreed statement, *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church*, notes that synodality and primacy are ‘interrelated, complementary and inseparable realities’ and that the relationship between the two in the first millennium ‘can give vital guidance to Orthodox and Catholics in their efforts to restore full communion today’.<sup>20</sup>

A further statement, *Primacy and Synodality in the Second Millennium and Today*, was agreed when the commission met in Alexandria in June 2023. The text provides a common reading of the difficult history of synodality and primacy in the second millennium, after the separation of East and West. It gives Orthodox and Catholics an opportunity to explain their different historical experiences to each other.

Sadly, tensions within Orthodoxy, especially between Moscow and Constantinople regarding the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, have had a wounding effect on the dialogue. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 cemented a breach of trust that will likely last for generations and the Russian Orthodox Church did not participate in the June 2023 meeting. Nevertheless, according to the guidelines established in 1980, the commission continues its work even in the absence of some churches.

Beyond this large pan-Orthodox commission, the Dicastery also maintains cordial relations with the individual Orthodox Churches. Rome and Constantinople continue to exchange delegations for their respective patronal feasts of Sts Peter and Paul and St Andrew,

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<sup>19</sup> Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, *The Images of the Church in the Syriac and Latin Patristic Traditions: A study document* (2022), §3.

<sup>20</sup> Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church* (2016), §5, §7.

respectively. The Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch have met on a number of occasions during the past two years, most recently on the occasion of the prayer vigil before the Synod assembly. Despite disagreement over the content of the online meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in March 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, informal contacts between Rome and Moscow have continued since then. The new Chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church's Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, has visited the Vatican and met the Pope twice in 2023. Within the last year, our Prefect, Cardinal Kurt Koch, has visited several heads of Orthodox Churches, including Patriarch Porfirje of Serbia.

### *Catholic–Anglican Dialogue*

The Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity is engaged in eleven ecumenical dialogues or conversations with communities or alliances deriving from separations within Western Christianity. These include the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, the Disciples of Christ, Pentecostals and New Charismatic Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Mennonite World Conference, and the Salvation Army.

The third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, ARCIC III, was established in 2011, with the mandate to explore 'the Church as Communion, local and universal, and how in communion the local and universal Church come to discern right ethical teaching'. ARCIC III's first Agreed Statement, which addressed the first half of the mandate, was agreed at the Commission's meeting in Erfurt in 2017.<sup>21</sup>

Since then, the commission has been addressing the second half of the mandate: how the Church local, regional and global discerns right ethical teaching. The commission is addressing the nature of moral discernment in the two traditions, how moral discernment has developed over the past half century, and how they each address disagreements on moral issues. The proposed document includes a case study on slavery, where the two traditions agree, and another on contraception, where they disagree. The case studies are not aimed at

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<sup>21</sup> Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church – Local, Regional, Universal* (2017).



resolving the moral issues themselves, but rather at describing the processes leading to the decisions reached, examining at what level of the Church they were made, and whether it was possible to permit any diversity.

A second, entirely separate, commission involving Anglicans and Catholics is IARCCUM, the International Anglican–Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission, which was established to encourage the reception and concrete implementation of the work of ARCIC. The second ever IARCCUM summit took place in January 2024, beginning in Rome and continuing in Canterbury. It drew together pairs of bishops, one Catholic, one Anglican, from twenty-seven different countries around the world for a week of shared prayer, study and commitment to cooperation.

A delegation of Roman Catholic bishops and officials of the Dicastery participated in the 2022 Lambeth Conference, which had as its theme, *God's Church for God's World—Walking, Listening and Witnessing Together*. As the incoming official for Anglican matters in the Dicastery, I was able to attend. I subsequently also attended the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Ghana in February 2023. The Archbishop of Canterbury joined Pope Francis and the then Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for an ecumenical peace pilgrimage in South Sudan a week before that, and, as mentioned above, Archbishop Welby met the Pope again recently on the eve of the Synod. The present moment is one of great sensitivity in the Anglican Communion, with serious division over human sexuality and marriage, which has resulted in Anglican churches in some parts of the world no longer being willing to recognise the Archbishop of Canterbury as head of the communion. The next Primates' Meeting of the Communion will take place in Rome, April 2024. As we pray for unity not only with the Anglican Communion, but *within* the Anglican Communion, the question of who actually represents and speaks for Anglicans will become ever more important.

### *Catholic–Methodist Dialogue*

In May 2022, the Methodist–Roman Catholic International Commission, MERCIC, completed its eleventh Report.<sup>22</sup> The document

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<sup>22</sup> Methodist–Roman Catholic International Commission, *God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission* (2022).

speaks of the church as a reconciled and reconciling community and examines the processes by which the two traditions maintain communion, ensuring unity while allowing legitimate diversity. It goes on to explore the ways in which reconciliation is celebrated liturgically in both traditions, and also looks at the ways in which Catholics and Methodists seek to be ministers of reconciliation in mission to the world. The World Methodist Council (WMC) will formally receive and approve the Report when it meets in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2024, but has already recommended it for study and publication by WMC member churches.

The first plenary meeting of the twelfth round of the MERCIC dialogue took place in Rome in October 2022. This phase is focusing on mission and synodality, particularly on the way mission shapes doctrinal formulation. The second plenary was scheduled for October 2023 in Jerusalem, but sadly had to be cancelled because of the war in the Holy Land. An online meeting took place instead.

### *Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue*

Lutherans and Catholics have been in official dialogue since the mid-1960s. Much has been achieved, including the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification of 1999. The Joint Commemoration of the Reformation in Lund (2016), presided over by Pope Francis and the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation, bears witness to the fruitfulness of this dialogue journey. The most recent Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity completed its work in 2019 with a report entitled *Baptism and Growth in Communion*.<sup>23</sup> The report proposed a differentiated consensus on common baptism and its implications for Church communion. Due to concerns about some ecclesiological statements contained in it, as well as ambiguities in the terminology chosen, the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, together with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, indicated that the Report should be considered as an open-ended study document, not yet ready for reception.

Dialogue and meetings have continued, however, including annual talks between the senior staff of the DPCU and those of the LWF. In September, during the LWF Assembly in Krakow, Cardinal Koch and Revd Dr Anne Burghardt, General Secretary of the LWF, presented a

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<sup>23</sup> Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *Baptism and Growth in Communion* (2020).

*Common Word* during an ecumenical prayer and baptismal commemoration. Looking ahead to the five-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 2030, they signalled the intention, explicitly encouraged by Pope Francis in 2021, to engage in shared reflection on this important document, declaring: ‘A common reflection could lead to another ‘milestone’ on the way from conflict to communion, comparable to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.’<sup>24</sup>

### *Catholic–Baptist Dialogue*

Baptists and Roman Catholics have been engaged in international conversations since 1984. The fifth meeting of the current phase of the international dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Catholic Church took place in Rome in December 2022. The goal of this dialogue is not to achieve full visible unity but to gain mutual understanding as well as clarification of theological matters and identification of possibilities for cooperation. The general theme of the current phase is the dynamic of the Gospel and the witness of the church today. The meeting in Rome was devoted to drafting and editing the report from the dialogue and planning for its subsequent reception, as well as to discussion of possible directions for a future phase of dialogue.

### *Catholic–Reformed Dialogue*

While the Catholic Church does not currently have an active dialogue with the Reformed Churches, we remain in frequent contact with the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The acting General Secretary was a Fraternal Delegate to the Synod in 2023. Also in October 2023, the first ever Reformed Ecumenical Office in Rome was inaugurated, with the installation of the first Reformed Ecumenical Liaison Officer. The Liaison Officer is a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. She will devote half her time to this representative role and half to the role of Minister of Rome’s Church of Scotland congregation. The Reformed Ecumenical Office will join the Anglican Centre in Rome and the Methodist Ecumenical Office Rome in maintaining a permanent representation of their respective communions in the Eternal City.

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<sup>24</sup> Lutheran World Federation and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *Common Word* (2023), §4.

### *Catholic–Pentecostal Dialogue*

The goal of the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Pentecostals appointed by some classical Pentecostal Churches affiliated with the Pentecostal World Fellowship, which started in 1972, is to promote mutual respect and understanding in matters of faith and practice. The third session of the seventh phase of this dialogue took place in Ghana in July 2023. The general theme of this phase, which started in 2018, is *Lex orandi, lex credendi* ('the law of prayer is the law of faith'). After reflecting on the general topic and discussing proclamation and preaching, the third session was dedicated to Worship/Prayer and Christian Life.

### *Catholic Dialogue with the Salvation Army*

The Salvation Army and the Catholic Church had a series of informal conversations between 2007 and 2012, the fruits of which were published in 2014. A second series of conversations began in London in November 2022, on the theme Discipleship for Mission. Bishop Brendan Leahy, co-chair of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, is the Catholic co-chair of these conversations. The second set of conversations took place in Rome in November 2023, focusing on the theme of missional discipleship in a change of epoch.

### *Multilateral Dialogues*

As well as relating to all these individual churches and communities, the Catholic Church is also in conversation with many multilateral bodies. Twenty delegated observers represented the Catholic Church at the World Council of Churches' eleventh Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2022. On that occasion, the tenth report of our Joint Working Group with the WCC was published, entitled, *Walking, Praying, and Working Together: An Ecumenical Pilgrimage*.<sup>25</sup>

Every year, a group of about thirty students from the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, representing more than twenty Christian churches and ecclesial communities, visit Rome during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. They meet with various Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, religious congregations and lay movements, and visit theological faculties and the main sites of Christian history in Rome.

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<sup>25</sup> Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, *Walking, Praying, and Working Together: An Ecumenical Pilgrimage* (2022).

Also, a staff member from our Dicastery is part of the planning group for the fourth global gathering of the Global Christian Forum, due to be held in Ghana in April 2024.

### **Challenges to Dialogue**

The network of relationships, conversations, dialogues, agreements, reports and statements is enormous. There is general agreement, however, that bilateral dialogues are facing a number of challenges, which over time, have begun to weaken their efficacy and their reception.

First, a weakening of confessional identity, affecting all communions, is not conducive to genuine ecumenical dialogue. Secondly, there are local and regional ecumenical agreements between particular historic communions or between some member churches of these communions, establishing full mutual exchange of pulpit and altar, without necessarily resolving significant differences of doctrine and order. These agreements often do not think through to the knock-on impact that some of these agreements can have on other relationships that one or other party has. While these agreements are born out of a desire to find a maximal form of unity, the ecumenical movement needs to resist the tendency to disregard the importance of doctrinal agreement.

A fundamental challenge to dialogue comes from the sometimes widely differing views on the very goal of the ecumenical movement itself. Despite the remarkable convergence it evinces, much of which was welcomed warmly in the official Catholic response, the range of opinions cited in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* and in the many responses collated by the WCC, shows that in fact, there is no shared vision of what the unity of the Church actually entails. Reaching a shared goal is even more difficult when there is no agreement as to what the goal is.

While diversity is an expression of the Spirit's gifts, and uniformity is not what we are seeking, disagreements that reach the level of contradiction are clearly very problematic. As the latest Catholic–Methodist dialogue document puts it:

Diversity has limits and ecclesial communion is not infinitely elastic such that it can embrace any and every diversity. Growth toward full, visible

communion will require the reform and renewal of those structures which serve and express the unity of each communion.<sup>26</sup>

The moving sight that I evoked at the beginning, of Pope Francis and the various Christian leaders blessing the crowd together at the vigil in St Peter's Square in September 2023, remains a powerful, almost intoxicating image of unity. But our call is to look beyond even that, towards that 'Reconciling Vision of Hope' that is full visible unity. The more intense walking together that marks the current synodal journey of the Catholic Church will surely help nurture closer and deeper communion. But promoting greater unity is a task for each and every one of us.

I close with some words which Pope Francis addressed to the Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Baselios Marthoma Matthews III:

The faith of Saint Thomas was inseparable from his experience of the wounds of the Body of Christ. The divisions that have occurred throughout history between us Christians have been painful wounds inflicted on the Body of Christ that is the Church. We ourselves continue to witness their effects. Yet if we touch these wounds together; if, like the Apostle, we proclaim together that Jesus is our Lord and our God; and if, with a humble heart, we entrust ourselves to his amazing grace, we can hasten the much-anticipated day when, with his help, we will celebrate the Paschal Mystery at the same altar. May this day arrive soon! In the meantime, dear Brother, let us advance together in the prayer that purifies us, in the charity that unites us, and in the dialogue that brings us closer to one another.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Methodist–Roman Catholic International Commission, *God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission* (2022), §38.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, Address to His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Matthews III, Catholicos of the East and Malankara, 11 September 2023.

## INCARNATIONAL PLURALISM: ECCLESIAL AND POLITICAL MANIFESTATIONS<sup>1</sup>

**Aristotle Papanikolaou**<sup>\*</sup>

*A consistent thread throughout the Orthodox tradition is that logos about God means experiencing the presence of God whose very being is diversity. Theology, then, cannot be imagined as anything but diversity, unity of all in all and in Christ, a fact which has implications for how diversity is understood and realized by Christians in both ecclesial and societal contexts. Using as its basic paradigms the union of the divine and the human in the Incarnation and the unity-in-diversity manifested in the Trinity, this article explores these implications, considering diversity in relation to dogma and canon, to morality, to ecclesial institution and the relationship of the Church to secular society.*

The theme of this article is ‘Theology Manifested as Diversity’, and I am afraid that I must begin on a negative note, one that will come as no surprise to the readers.

‘Diversity’ is not a word that one typically associates with Orthodox Christianity. In fact, there are many who would try and present Orthodoxy as the ‘anti-diversity’, as that which militates against diversity, as that which has successfully guarded against diversity since the apostolic period. At its extreme, this logic of purity suffers no divergence or diversity, even extending to such details as priestly beards and headscarves, to name simply a few examples. This search for the

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<sup>1</sup> Paper given at the annual research conference of Sankt Ignatios Folkhögskola in Södertälje, Sweden, 15–18 December 2022, during which the author was presented with the Order of Sankt Ignatios he had been awarded in 2021, together with his colleague George Demacopoulos. The theme of the conference was ‘Theology Manifested as Diversity.’ A shortened version was published in Swedish in the journal *Signum* 8/2023.

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pure and unadulterated has led to the emergence of groups like the old-calendarist churches, which themselves have splintered in multiple ways up to the point where somewhere there is a small parish of less than a hundred that probably is claiming to be the true, true, true, true Orthodox Church. The irony here is that the logic of purity is unsustainable and, ultimately, splinters, gives birth to its own form of diversity, but not one that I would call Incarnational, especially as the diversity that is evident is one that sees the Other as a threat. It is in this logic of purity that perhaps we can apply Jean-Paul Sartre's proverbial 'Hell is other people', or, if we may be allowed to amplify Sartre, Hell is that which is simply 'other'.

To understand how a theology manifested as diversity may be possible within the Orthodox Church, we must first understand what we mean by theology. Of course, as we all know, theology is logos about God, but one thing that our Orthodox tradition has gotten correct is that this logos about God cannot be reduced to mere propositional statements. There is a deeper kind of knowing that is possible when it comes to God than simply propositional statements. This, of course, does not mean that reason, language, and propositional statements do not play a role in theological discourse—they do; it simply means that knowing God is more than discourse.

### **Theology and Incarnation**

Theology likes to ask the questions, 'who is God?', 'what is God?' and 'where is God?', and Orthodox Christians have always had one response to all these questions: the person of Jesus Christ. There have always been diverse responses throughout Christian history to Jesus's question: 'who do you say that I am?', ranging from simply being a nice guy to God appearing as human. But for Orthodox Christians, Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ/Messiah is God, the God-man, divine humanity, in whom is revealed, accomplished, and made available the realism of divine-human communion. If theology is about God, then Orthodox Christianity points to the person of Jesus Christ as the event of God's revelation, of the knowing of God and, simultaneously, of the knowing of what God has made possible for God's creation. It is for this reason that quite rightly in our iconographic tradition, depictions of the Father and the Holy Spirit are not allowed because Christ is the visibility of all that God is—the trinitarian God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who makes possible communion with God's life to the Other of God, the



not-God, God's creation. What is revealed is that other people or, simply, the 'other', is not the condition for the possibility of hell but of a loving communion in which we become what we were created to be.

It is in and through this singular event of the Incarnation and passion of the God-man that we get our first glimpse of diversity, which is God's very life as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It also reveals what one might call eschatological diversity, which is the unity of all and all in Christ, the *logoi* in the Logos, the *logoi* as the Logos, the cosmos as the Body of Christ. This unity does not negate the irreducible uniqueness and otherness that is God's creation. If theology is the union of the created and uncreated, is the divine humanity as revealed in Christ, then creation is destined for eschatological unity in Christ, which, of course, is the ultimate unity-in-diversity, a communion between God and creation, without separation and without confusion, that is itself an event of God's very trinitarian life as unity-in-diversity.

This cosmic unity in the Body of Christ has, within the patristic literature, been typically identified as the Church, which, of course, is also realized in the Eucharist itself, where we encounter the faithful, together with all of creation symbolized in the bread and wine, as being constituted as the Body of Christ, where the faithful are constituted as children of God in relation to the Father, as the Son relates to the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit who constitutes this gathering as the Body of Christ. Just as when we ask 'where is God?', we point to Jesus Christ, so too when we ask 'where is the Church—the Body of Christ?', we point to the Eucharist. The Eucharist, which we offer in time and history, is identical to the Eucharist offered from eternity, and it is eternity interrupting time and history, an event of the eschatological body of Christ, even if it sometimes does not look or feel that way, even if we are not in a place to contemplate or experience this eschatological event as such. I think Metropolitan John Zizioulas is right that in the Eucharist, the faithful are constituted as persons, which means as irreducibly unique and ecstatically free from the necessity of a sinful nature, and that this personhood is a relational event—one of love, each in relation to all and in relation to God.<sup>2</sup> And it is in and through human personhood that all of creation is offered to God the Father, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, so that the cosmos itself may be

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<sup>2</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 49–65.

personalized, that is rendered irreducibly unique and ecstatically free. The Eucharist is an event of theology, and event of the Body of Christ, of union with God, and, as such, it is an event of the simultaneity of communion and otherness, of unity and diversity.

### **Incarnation and Diversity**

Even at the level of the individual ascent toward God, the spiritual struggle toward union with God, which we describe as *theosis*, deification, the affirmation that God became human so that humans can become gods—even this event of theology, of divine-human communion, is an event of diversity insofar as deification is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. This is one area where we, as Orthodox, do not highlight diversity enough and often present a homogeneous picture of deification as the wise person giving prophetic advice or insight from his isolated cell, or feeding the bears in the forest, or battling the demons in the desert. Why is it that we do not have mundane pictures of *theosis*, of people who radiate goodness in their daily mundane lives, who through their special talent or vocation simply extend the presence of God to those and that which surround them? Given our unique genetic makeup, social and historical contexts, bodily capacities, it simply cannot be the case that the road to *theosis* looks the same for everyone or that it is only possible in the context of a monastery. The picture we paint of *theosis* often assumes a human being with the capacity to will what is good, but the will does not function in a vacuum and such a picture of *theosis* would render millions of human beings as ‘exceptions’. Here I offer my first prescriptive remark: we need to complicate *theosis*, to think about it in such a way that it takes into account the diverse ways of experiencing our humanity. The road and even the experience of *theosis* may be unique to someone with a specific physical impairment, as opposed to someone who grew up in a relatively rich and privileged environment with no physical impairments, which itself may entail its own unique challenges to *theosis*. Even if we are all united in Christ, through which we are constituted as children of God, each of us in our own unique way have our own unique story or narrative when it comes to our relationship with God, and that unique story is just as much shaped by our bodies, dispositions, personalities, as it is our social and historical context. Union with God is itself an event and affirmation of diversity.

All that I have said so far comes, I am sure, as no surprise to anyone 'in the know' in the Orthodox world, but let me sum up this part by declaring that the theme 'Theology Manifested as Diversity', is as much a propositional truth as it is a call for reflection. Theology understood as divine-human communion, that which is revealed in the person of Christ, simply is manifested as diversity, in terms of the cosmic, the communal, and the individual. As an event of divine-humanity, theology is unity-in-diversity, the simultaneity of the one and the many, communion and otherness. The real question is not whether theology is manifested as diversity, but, rather, once we know that it inevitably is manifested as diversity, what are the implications for ecclesial life, and for ecclesial engagement with the world both at the communal and individual level.

### **Diversity and Dogma**

Let me begin addressing this question by first turning to that area of ecclesial life where diversity is not evident, helpful, or allowed, and this has to do with dogmas. A dogma is a propositional truth and, within the Orthodox Church, these propositional truths were declared in Ecumenical Councils. The most famous dogmatic statement is that of the fourth Ecumenical Council on Christ, and, in fact, if one thinks about it, most dogmatic statements are about the person of Christ, even those on the Theotokos or the icons. These dogmatic statements, about Christ's divinity and humanity, the mode of union, the two wills, are, of course, about God insofar as Christ is the revelation of all that God is. One could then say that the Trinity is a dogmatic statement even if it was declared by affirming the divinity of the Son and the Spirit. Dogmatic statements are non-negotiable propositional statements; they articulate beliefs that are constitutive of our Orthodox tradition; in other words, if they were to be changed, our Orthodoxy would not quite look the same. Even if there were a diversity of views of who Christ is in Christian history prior to the fourth century, the Councils themselves established through the dogmas certain ground rules for theologizing, and those ground rules include a default affirmation of the dogmas on the person of Christ. In other words, the dogmas themselves are not up for debate, even if their meaning is subject to ongoing interpretation, and they establish what one might call the grammar for theological discourse proper. Theologizing may, itself, draw on diverse authoritative sources—the Scriptures, patristic and

liturgical texts, etc.—but dogmas are the interpretive lens through which we must try to understand all the shared authoritative sources.

While we may speak of dogmas as restricting the scope of diversity when speaking about Christ, what goes unremarked is how few dogmas there actually are. One could interpret this paucity of dogmas in a positive way as providing a framework for ongoing and diverse interpretations of the Christ event that shares a common epistemic framework. In other words, contrary to what is normally meant by ‘dogmatic’, that is, some hegemonic and oppressive stifling of discussion and thinking, dogmas provide the framework within which acceptable forms of diversity may emerge. This diversity may include liturgical forms and even revisable canons; it may also include theological statements, so long as such statements are plausible within the logic of divine-human communion, which is the underlying logic of the dogmatic statements on Christ. As an example, the filioque, that theological statement that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, rather than debating its dogmatic status that would perpetuate a division in the Christian churches, might be considered as a legitimate and interesting theological discussion within the epistemic framework of the dogmatic tradition. The same could be said for Russian Sophiology, especially Sergius Bulgakov’s deployment of the concept of ‘Sophia’. In some sense, even though dogmas restrict the scope of diverse statements on the person of Christ and the Holy Spirit, they provide the framework for ongoing theological debate and discussion and, hence, a theological diversity, but they also provide the way in which to discern legitimate forms of diversity, ones that would be consistent with the logic of divine-human communion as encoded in the dogmas of the Church.

### **Moral Diversity**

If there cannot exist diverse dogmas on the person of Christ, but, instead, dogmas frame acceptable forms of diversity—including diversity in liturgical and theological expressions—does it make sense to speak of moral diversity? At first, this would appear to be oxymoronic, as morality implies a truth about how we should act, and it would seem to make sense that God has established universal laws in relation to our actions. If our relationship with God were one that was primarily contractual—that is, that if we do certain actions we get a reward, but if our actions are transgressive, we get punished—the idea

of clearly established universal laws might make sense. But as I have been arguing, our relationship with God is not transactional but is rather one of communion. God did not create us in order to mark a checklist before we die; God created us for communion with God, even in this life. In fact, I would say that the emphasis on what happens to us after we die in Christianity is misplaced, as theology proper, the Christ event, really reveals to us what is possible for us now, the kind of relationship with God that is possible now. I would also argue that even though in a popular understanding Christianity is about rules, in the end, it is not about rules per se. Of course, we need rules, but the four Gospels read before the beginning of Orthodox Lent all point to the dangers of the overemphasis on rules—the Publican and the Pharisee, the Prodigal Son with the brother emphasizing rules over mercy and love, the parable of the Last Judgement, where we will be judged by how we treat those who break the rules, and Forgiveness Sunday, where Jesus cautions us to fast in secret and tells us that our heart, and thus our treasure, should be centered on forgiveness, which, in the end, is a state of being rather than simply a following of a rule to forgive.

To take another angle, there is a reason that the church has differentiated between canons and dogmas; there is a reason why canons are usually issued in response to what is being experienced on the ground rather than as deduction from universal principles, since the Church is constantly discerning what are the rules that would guide and facilitate our communion with God. Here, the key word is discernment, such an enormously important word in the Church's spiritual lexicon, which itself implies ongoing consideration, reflection, attention, attunement, and assessment of the whole person in their specific social, geographical and historical context. The goal is not to follow the rule for the rule's sake, since following the rule does not necessarily mean being any closer to God, as we see with the brother of the Prodigal Son. The goal is communion with God and how best to guide the specific human being toward experiencing incrementally God's presence. What I am suggesting has nothing to do with situation ethics or relativism, which themselves are based on contractual understandings of ethics, and also since I am pointing very clearly to a goal, a telos, for which we as humans and creation itself were created. This goal is communion with God. I am simply indicating that the road to communion with God is not a formula, nor is it achieved simply by performing the rule. We must also be honest about the fact that the

Church has supported certain rules that today would be unacceptable, even if tacitly or implicitly, such as slavery and patriarchal norms that allowed for spousal abuse, among other injustices. Again—there must be a reason to explain the difference between dogmas and canons, that the Church did not dogmatize morality. As I indicated, canons have never been deductive but are inferential, based on the experience within a specific context and, historically, they are moral prescriptions but never amounting to the non-negotiable status that one finds with dogmas. Thus, can we then speak about diversity when it comes to morality? Here we must be careful—it is more accurate to say that theology is manifested as diversity in the sense that historically, we continue to discern how divine-human communion is not and cannot be manifested when humans are treated as slaves, or, put more positively, that perhaps it is manifested in changing social and cultural relations that were once deemed literally unimaginable.

### **Diversity and Institution**

The dogmas and the canons of the Church emerged not from sacramental events, but from institutional structures in the Church—the councils—even if dogmas and canons attempt to point us to sacramental realities. At this point, it must be clear that theology understood as an event of divine-human communion cannot be identified with the institutional structures of the Church, even if we hope that such structures exist in such a way so as to facilitate relational patterns that approximate or, in some sense, reflect the divine-human communion that is theology. One could argue that the institution of the council is an institutional structure that is grounded in the event of divine-human communion that is the Eucharist. In other words, a council is a natural institutional outgrowth from the Eucharist insofar as it attempts to respect the fullness of the local eucharistic assemblies and provide institutional representations encompassing these local gatherings for deliberating common institutional problems. Councils have existed at various scales depending on the existing territorial boundaries of any given historical period. Councils have had global and local impacts, depending on what is discussed. It is impossible for any institutional structure to be an event of theology, but in councils we see an institutional structure that at least attempts to analogize theology manifested as diversity.

The issue with councils throughout the history of the Orthodox Church is not the structure itself, but the representation. Councils have been dominated by bishops of the Church, and as much as I affirm their essential role in councils, representation must be expanded to include the presence of lay people and, most especially women, given that women are absent from the clerical orders. There is hope, of course, for the reinstatement of the female diaconate, but even without the female diaconate, councils at the local, regional, and global levels must include more diverse representation if they wish to approximate as much as possible patterns of relationality that reflect the event of theology manifested as diversity. Councils are not an event of theology, *per se*, but must at least look something like the event of theology, and the current configuration falls short. As I have said in other contexts, currently, in the Orthodox Church, councils look very much like the House of Lords without the House of Commons.

In addition to mirroring ‘theology manifested as diversity’ within its own institutional structures, the institutional Church, which includes the autocephalous churches comprised of various metropolises, dioceses, and parishes, faces the challenge on how to encounter the non-ecclesial world in a way that also promotes structures that would facilitate relational patterns that would look something like the event of divine-human communion realized within the Eucharist. It is not simply, however, the institutional Church, but also individual Orthodox Christians in their day-to-day, mundane encounters, which always present the opportunity to image or iconize the presence of God, especially since each of us is made in this image. Throughout its history, the scorecard of the institutional Church has not been very good when it comes to encountering various forms of non-ecclesial diversity, which may include the religious, moral, cultural, social, and political. Rather than giving a historical overview of the institutional Church’s successes and, mostly, failures when encountering non-ecclesial diversity, I would like to focus my attention on the situation with the Orthodox Churches after the fall of communism, that is, after roughly the late 1980s and early 1990s.

### **Beyond Empires**

I have argued that it is only after the fall of communism that the Orthodox were forced to learn to live without empires—whether they be Byzantine, Ottoman, or empire-like communist regimes. It is only

after the fall of communism that the Orthodox churches had to contend with the kind of diversity that one may expect in political structures claiming to be democratic in form, however one defines or envisions the form of democracy. To this day, there is not a single Orthodox Church that denounces democracy, even in Russia, and yet since the fall of communism, the Orthodox Churches have had an ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with democracy. This ambivalence and ambiguity are often expressed in the rhetoric one hears often from the institutional Churches, especially its bishops and priests, against the secular West. It is well-known that in the revival of Orthodox theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a theological anti-westernism emerged in which Orthodox theology was often framed in a distorted apophaticism as what the West is not. Since the fall of communism, a new anti-westernism reared its head in the Orthodox churches, which is more political in form than theological, even if there are theological overtones. This new anti-westernism sees the West, meaning mostly Western Europe, North America, Australia, and other smaller regions around the world, as antagonistically secular, meaning liberal in the sense of promoting hyper-individualism, hyper-consumerism, intentionally attempting to eliminate or marginalize religion, and eroding what has come to be called traditional values.

As the work of Kristina Stoeckl, principal investigator of the European Research Council's Postsecular Conflicts project, has made clear, especially in her recently published *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (co-authored with Dmitry Uzlaner), Russia, and, specifically, the Russian Orthodox Church, has played a leading role in this new anti-westernism, having globalized the culture wars and having become the global moral entrepreneur of traditional values. Before the war against Ukraine, Russia's global leadership on promoting traditional values was recognized even in the West, especially by American Evangelicals and, as Sarah Riccardi-Swartz has shown in her book, *Between Heaven and Russia*, by converts to Orthodoxy who were seeing Putin as one who could possibly save the United States. This rhetoric about Russia as a country rooted in traditional values even played a role, among many other causes, in Russia's justification of its war against Ukraine, as it tried to prevent Ukraine and Ukrainians from being seduced by the godless, western liberalism. Although Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church played a leading role in globalizing the



culture wars, they were, no doubt, echoing the sentiment of the institutional churches in the other, traditionally Orthodox countries.

As I have argued, these institutional Orthodox Churches always supported the transition to democratic structures, but it was also clear that after the fall of communism, there was an attempt to reassert the cultural, social, and political influence of the Orthodox Churches. And, in fact, most of these churches succeeded in reconnecting ethnic and religious identity and the creation of a new kind of religious nationalism. These churches were, indeed, caught in a kind of conflict between supporting democratic structures, but resisting the kind of pluralism that is arguably an essential part of democratic structures, especially since that kind of pluralism could potentially weaken the position of the Orthodox churches within these traditional Orthodox countries. This resistance, again, would be expressed in the form of an attack against the secular West, which usually means a Western society hostile to religion. This understanding of 'secular', however, is merely rhetorical, because even though there is a minority group that would seek to eliminate or marginalize religion in the West, and even if religion has changed in form in the West, it has never been eliminated, and the degree of marginalization or privatization depends on the particular western country in question. It is really difficult to argue that religion is marginalized in the US, but even in Europe, while church attendance is extremely low in a country like Norway, the New York Times reported in 2015 that the new passion among Norwegians was ghost hunting.

### **Secular Pluralism and Christian Secularism**

The default understanding of the word 'secular' is this idea of intentional elimination or marginalization of religion, and it is often synonymous with the West, but under the cover of this kind of rhetoric, what is forgotten is that the secular understood in terms of both time and space sparked a social imaginary for a kind of political pluralism unprecedented in human history. Some version of pluralism has always existed—even in premodern societies and empires. Secular pluralism, however, means, at least theoretically, that no one can be designated a second-class citizen in a society as a result of who they are, in the way that Orthodox were once second-class citizens under the Ottomans, or Jews were second-class citizens under the Byzantine empire. It means the civil acceptance of various faith traditions, ethnicities, and lifestyle

choices in a way that never existed in premodern societies and empires. The institutional Orthodox churches have tried to reject the secular altogether—including secularism understood as a public, pluralistic space—and to uphold Christianity as a state religion, either officially or unofficially. This approach is motivated by fear that the decline of religious participation in the West will be mirrored in these post-communist countries. In other words, these countries worry that in time, being religious will not be simply the default, and that national identity will no longer be linked to religious identity. History has also taught that since the shift to secularization occurred in the West, state religions—both official and unofficial—often produce resentment more than they inspire belief. In short, enshrining a state religion is not an effective long-term strategy.

What the Orthodox should really focus on, and should be discussing more often, is whether we can accept what I would call a Christian secularism. This would mean recognizing that religion now has a different social role. It would mean making peace with pluralism. This kind of secularism does not mean denying religions a public voice; quite the opposite, it actually allows multiple religious voices to have a public hearing. The hard question for Christians, and especially for Orthodox Christians, is what role religion should play in a society, especially one purportedly committed to democratic structures.

The first and primary role that the Orthodox Church (as an institution) and Orthodox Christians (as individuals) should play in the political space is to promote and protect religious pluralism.

Orthodox Christians must recognize that a language of common social accord, one that insists upon the inviolability of human dignity and freedom, is needed for the preservation and promotion of a just society; and the language of human rights has the power to accomplish this with admirable clarity. Neither, certainly, should Orthodox Christians fear the reality of cultural and social pluralism. Indeed, they should rejoice in the dynamic confluence of human cultures in the modern world, which is one of the special glories of our age, and take it as a blessing that all human cultures, in all their variety and beauty, are coming more and more to occupy the same civic and political spaces. The Church must in fact support those government policies and laws that best promote such pluralism. More than that, it must thank God for the riches of all the

world's many cultures, and for the gracious gift of their peaceful coexistence in modern societies.<sup>3</sup>

The political space is, by nature, that space where we encounter the other—the person who does not believe what we believe. That ‘other’ should not be coerced, either directly or indirectly, to convert to the majority religion of a particular nation.

Besides this, however, there are other forms of pluralism that Orthodox churches should both accept and promote in the political space, such as moral pluralism. For instance, women cannot be ordained as priests in the Orthodox Church, but this should not prevent the Church from promoting the full equality of women in every aspect of society within the public sphere. The Church directs its faithful to refrain from sex before marriage; but this particular moral rule should not be imposed on the broader public—especially since there can be many forms of pre- or non-marital sexual encounters that do not necessarily threaten the common good. More examples could be given. It is not that the Church cannot have a voice; rather, it has to decide what it should say in light of a commitment to a democratically free and equal public space. Put more theologically, the Church needs to discern how to act in such a way that it shapes a public sphere that is hospitable and welcoming of the stranger. It is in promoting such a pluralistic space that the Church acts most consistently with its own beliefs and values. In so doing, it is supporting a secular space that is Christian.

One question we must ask ourselves now is whether we would be able to see theology manifested in the political space, especially one committed to diversity? Recall that I am defining theology, the logos about God, as an experiential knowledge, as an event of divine-human communion. In this sense, it seems that one cannot and should not identify ‘theology’ with the political community, especially since there is a clear distinction between an ecclesial and a political community. In the latter, we must relate with others who do not share the same beliefs as we do; in fact, in a political space committed to pluralism and diversity, we even share that space civilly with those who believe in the non-existence of God. And yet, to completely separate the ecclesial and the political, the mystical from the political, would be to engage in a

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<sup>3</sup> *For the Life of the World: The Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, §12, <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos?fbclid=IwAR2RSPrgYRhPfAgT9pziIQkd9wqtOYJ74Gtjnpmyq9xYdxshwqr6U1FjFiY>, accessed on 18 February 2024.

kind of logic of dualism that is in contradiction with an incarnational logic. To strictly identify the ecclesial and the political, as some forms of the Orthodox notion of 'symphonia' do, would be in contradiction with an incarnational logic by eliding the ecclesial and the political. To discern the incarnational in the political space is to affirm what is distinctly good and godly about a political community whose end or telos is distinct from that of the ecclesial community. Surely, we must be able to judge whether and how a political community can exist so as to mirror to a greater or lesser degree the divine-human communion we imagine is both present and possible for the ecclesial community. Such a political structure must have diversity as a value and a goal, and if it is the kind of diversity in which each human being is treated as irreducibly unique, then we see some analogous form of theology manifested in such a political structure, even if it inevitably falls short of what God has made possible for all of creation in Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion: Theology manifested as diversity**

To conclude, in response to the question of whether there can be a 'theology manifested as diversity', a consistent thread throughout the Orthodox tradition is that logos about God is experiencing the presence of God whose very being is diversity. I really cannot imagine theology otherwise than as diversity, unity of all in all and in Christ. Throughout its history, both internally and in response to the world, the Church has manifested less of a commitment to diversity and has, ironically, often worked against it in the name of Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church would not be the first institution to live in contradiction with its core principles and beliefs, but one would hope that these core beliefs, one of which is theology manifested as diversity, would provide a check against the momentum against diversity within the Orthodox Church, and in the churches' and individual Orthodox Christians' response to diversity. If the Orthodox are really serious about the axiom that all of creation is sacramental, then creation itself is sacramental in all its diverse life forms. But we must also realize that the presence of God is only discernible in patterns of relationship in which diversity is fostered and facilitated. This must include non-ecclesial forms of diversity. Diversity is not antithetical to Orthodoxy; if Orthodoxy is ultimately about correct knowledge of God, and if such knowledge is, in the end, experiential, then Orthodoxy is not a set of propositional statements

but a mode of being in which diversity is at the very core of what it means to be Orthodox. Or, at least, it should be.

Such an understanding of theology also has far-reaching ecumenical implications. In the past 100 years, one of the most consequential debates in the theological world, one that affected Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox alike, was the nature–grace debate. It is a debate that had a clear winner and an outcome that I think within the broader theological world achieved the closest perhaps we can come to a consensus—that nature is indeed graced. In my own theological idiom, I would say that creation was created for deification, to bear the weight of the divine; that if Anselm could say that that than which nothing greater can be thought is God’s existence, I would say what is greater is not simply a God who exists, but who exists to be in communion with the not-God.

Over the past century, theologians in my own Orthodox tradition used to like to claim the notion of *theosis* exclusively for the Orthodox, but there is much research that shows that the idea that *theosis* was exclusively an Eastern thing was actually and ironically an idea popularized by Adolf von Harnack via Ferdinand Baur and Albrecht Ritschl. In other words, a modern construction with no basis in the actual texts. There is even more research to show that deification language is evident across the Christian trajectory—from Luther, to Calvin, to Eckhart, to Aquinas, to Julian of Norwich, to Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory of Nyssa. In our theological world, what is currently emphasized are diverse perspectives, social and historical locations, with a privileging of the marginalized and minoritized voices. I think we should continue to do that, but that we do so embracing a common epistemic framework that already exists, one that functions as a kind of epistemic default, or as a kind of basic first principle. That first principle is the belief that the Incarnational reveals that creation is destined for communion with God and theology’s role is to probe, question, critique how it is that such a communion can be realized and what it is that gets in the way, both at the individual level but also at the systemic level. I think that what this common epistemic principle of divine-human communion does, is allow us to see our theological differences as debates over what this divine humanity, this graced nature should look like rather than incommensurable language games that have the danger of perpetuating the impression of dualism and unbridgeable divides, the kind of ontology that, in my opinion,

Chalcedon was trying to overcome. My hope is that we embrace a theotic imagination, so that we may recognize what already unites us, even as we imagine different ways in which to think about and realize divine-human communion.

## LISTENING TO EACH OTHER, LISTENING TOGETHER: BOSE INTERNATIONAL ECUMENICAL CONFERENCES ON ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

**Br Guido Dotti**\*

*Every year, the monastic community of Bose, Italy hosts an international ecumenical conference on Orthodox spirituality. The two following papers, Metropolitan Job's 'The Apophtegmata Patrum: A Wisdom That Still Challenges Men and Women of Today' and Norman Russell's 'Love of God and Love of Neighbour: An Evangelical Challenge Open to Various Solutions', were given at the Conference dedicated to the Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers in September 2023. By way of introduction, Br Guido of Bose presents the history and vision of the Conferences.*

For thirty years now, since 1993, the Monastery of Bose in Italy has been a meeting place for Christians from East and West wishing to discuss aspects of Christian spirituality. They are Christians belonging to the Orthodox, Reformed, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, and these encounters have been and will continue to be essentially an occasion for listening to each other. 'You have seen your brother, you have seen God' is a frequently quoted saying of the Desert Fathers. One could paraphrase it and say 'You have heard your brother or sister (i.e. you are able to listen to him/her), you have heard God (i.e. you are then able to make room in your life for the word of God)'; for indeed, how can we say we love (and therefore we listen to, serve and follow) God whom we do not see, if we do not love our brother or sister whom we do see? (1 John 5:20)?

It is precisely this wish to listen to one's neighbour—a primary prerequisite for any dialogue—that motivates and drives the Bose Conferences on the history of Christian spirituality. They are intended

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as a service to all Churches, as an occasion for joint study and mutual encounters, for investigating the spiritual wealth of the Eastern Church, those 'authentic theological traditions of the Eastern Christians' which, as the Second Vatican Council authoritatively notes, are 'rooted in the Holy Scriptures [...] expressed in liturgical life [...] nourished by the living Apostolic tradition, by the writings of Fathers and ascetics from the East [...] aspiring to a correct approach to life, indeed to the full contemplation of Christian truth'<sup>1</sup>.

The participation in these conferences of Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformed Christians underscores the precise practice of these encounters: let the other define him- or herself and bring testimony of what he/she holds most dear. What lies at the heart of each specific Christian tradition is its own history of holiness, where the gifts of the Holy Spirit are manifest and become incarnate in a concrete manner and in a particular path, and through grace come to bring sense and hope to all Churches and to all humankind.

In 2022, and still in collaboration with the Orthodox Churches, the Monastery of Bose resumed this tradition, which had been forcibly and sadly interrupted in the last two years due to the pandemic crisis, and decided, despite the miserable situation caused by the war in Ukraine, to organise again the International Ecumenical Conferences on Orthodox Spirituality. In 2022 the Conference was entirely dedicated to St Isaac of Nineveh and his spiritual teaching and in 2023 to the Sayings of the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert.

In this way, the Bose ecumenical Conferences return in a certain way 'to their origins': From the beginning until 2006, in fact, they were almost always dedicated to figures of Slavonic or Byzantine Orthodox sanctity. In 2007, with the Conference dedicated to 'Christ Transfigured in the Orthodox Spiritual Tradition', the two sections, Slavonic and Byzantine, were merged into a single conference, and a new series dedicated to more general themes of Orthodox and Christian spirituality began that year.

The forced hiatus of the last few years, during which brothers and sisters of the Monastery of Bose gathered advice and received solicitations and encouragement from numerous friends inviting them to resume and continue the initiative, again almost naturally suggested a rethinking of the format of our conferences.

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<sup>1</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio* 17.



Bose's wish, however, is that the ecumenical Conferences on Orthodox spirituality remain first and foremost a place of encounter, fraternal exchange and free discussion between Christians belonging to all confessions. Moreover, Christians belonging to the Orthodox Churches have over the past thirty years repeatedly expressed their particular appreciation for this annual event, which has offered them the opportunity not only to deepen the sources of their spirituality, but above all to meet again in simple fraternity, beyond an institutional ecclesial framework, in fact a rare and precious possibility in the context of Orthodoxy.

The choice to return to the figures of holiness—but this time to transversal figures of holiness, which have been to some extent significant for all the Orthodox Churches and more generally for all Christian denominations—responds to the desire to return once again to the common sources of Orthodox spirituality, beyond individual traditions and national affiliations, and to the contribution it has been and still is able to offer to the whole of Christianity.

Without intruding into the internal dialogue between the Orthodox Churches, the Monastery of Bose would like, through reading and listening to the texts and lives of the holy fathers, particularly from the monastic tradition, to be able to continue to offer an opportunity for fraternal encounters to return together to the common sources of faith and spiritual life. Monks and nuns in Bose and participants in the Conferences share the conviction that it is precisely the monastic tradition, largely common to East and West and so central to Orthodox spirituality, that can continue to be a fruitful ground for dialogue and communion in the experience of faith.

## THE APOPHTEGMATA: A WISDOM THAT STILL CHALLENGES MEN AND WOMEN OF OUR TIME<sup>1</sup>

### Metropolitan Job of Pisidia<sup>\*</sup>

*One of the main aims of the Bose Orthodox Spirituality Conference is to offer Christians from different traditions an opportunity to return together to the common sources of faith and spiritual life. This article gives a presentation of one of these sources: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Short, laconic, pragmatic and often humorous, these words of wisdom continue to inspire and challenge men and women of today, and can guide Christians together on the journey towards their common goal: Union with God.*

The sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, known as *apophthegmata*, and contained in the *Gerontikon*, constitute a disparate literature elaborated from the fifth century, collecting conversations, stories and words, without connection with each other. Some are attributed to a well-identified person, and help us to form a portrait of him; others are anonymous, because these Fathers and Mothers had wished, out of humility, to disappear from the gaze of men, but, nevertheless, the tradition has preserved their wisdom for the edification of Christians.

These 'words of salvation' or edifying sayings convey an oral tradition. They essentially transmit the Egyptian monastic tradition of Scetis

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<sup>1</sup> An Italian translation of this paper will be published in the Proceedings of the 29<sup>th</sup> Orthodox Spirituality Conference (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2024).

<sup>\*</sup> His Eminence Metropolitan Job of Pisidia was born in Montreal (Canada). After completing High School in Montreal, he studied at Saint Andrew's College in Winnipeg and at the University of Manitoba (Canada), Saint Sergius' Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, the Catholic University of Paris and the University of Lorraine (France). He holds a doctorate and a habilitation in theology. He has taught in various universities and currently still teaches at the Catholic University of Paris. He serves as Co-president of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. He is a member of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. As a renowned scholar, he is the author of numerous books and articles on Orthodox Liturgy and Spirituality.

which reconciles orthodoxy with orthopraxy, the accuracy of doctrine with the accuracy of practice. Most of these monks were illiterate. Therefore, the main object of their study was to memorize Holy Scripture, the Revelation of God. However, for this learning, it was necessary for them to have an 'instruction manual'. The *apophthegmata* constituted for them this manual, elaborated on the basis of their personal experiences, sometimes happy, sometimes having ended in failures. It is on the basis of this experience of the Gospel lived in the desert of Egypt that these sayings have been transmitted as un-systematized rules of spiritual life.

In this sense, some may say that these sayings belong not to the past, to the fourth or fifth centuries, but rather to the age to come, to the inaugurated Kingdom of God. They speak to our present age of an experience of a new life in Christ, of a fullness and renewal of human life, and for this reason, their wisdom still challenges men and women of our time, as shown by the growing interest in them from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day.

### **The Relevance of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers**

One of the most-read spiritual writers of the twentieth century, the famous American Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) admired the *apophthegmata* and published them in one of his books entitled: *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*, published in 1960,<sup>2</sup> which was one of his own favorite books because he hoped to spend the last years of his life as a hermit. This translation had several reprints: 1961, 1970, 1994, 2004. In this book, one may recognize the translator's personal tone, the blend of reverence and humor so characteristic of him. He actually identified himself with these Fathers who sought solitude and contemplation in the deserts of Scetis, turning their backs on a corrupt society of their time, which has actually much in common with our contemporary world.

The first complete translation of the *apophthegmata* from the Greek into English appeared in 1975 thanks to Benedicta Ward.<sup>3</sup> It was later

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Benedicta Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1975; revised edition, 1985); Id., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, Revised ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2004).

revised in 1985 and published in 2003 in the famous Penguin Classics collection. An English translation of the Syriac Collection had already been published in 1934 by Sir Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge at Oxford University Press, which was reprinted in London in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

In his book entitled *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* and published in 2004, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams goes back to the sayings of the Desert Fathers looking for inspiration and insight, and shows how the spirituality of the desert resonates strongly with aspects of the modern spiritual search.<sup>5</sup>

More recently John Wortley, Professor Emeritus of Medieval History at the University of Manitoba, has published a translation of the Systematic Collection of the Sayings in the Cistercian Studies Series in 2012, as well as an edition and English translation of the Anonymous Sayings at the prestigious Cambridge University Press in 2013. Another volume is forthcoming. He is also the author of an Introduction to the Desert Fathers published by Cambridge University Press in 2019, which explores the origins and the development of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers.<sup>6</sup>

The Abbey of Solesmes in France published the French translation of the sayings from 1966–1985. First the Latin systematic collection was translated by Dom Jean Dion and Dom Guy Oury, with an introduction by Dom Lucien Regnault, in 1966, followed by unpublished or little-known sayings translated from the Greek, Latin, Armenian, Syriac, Ethiopian and Coptic in 1970. A third collection was published in 1976, followed by the Alphabetical Collection in 1981 and the Anonymous Collection in 1985. A new translation of the systematic collection,

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<sup>4</sup> Sir Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, *The Sayings and Stories of the Christian Fathers of Egypt: The Syrian Version of the Apophthegmata Patrum*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934, reprint in London: Kegan Paul Limited, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert*, (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> John Wortley, *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers, the Systematic Collection*, Cistercian Studies Series Volume 240 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012); *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); *More Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge, forthcoming); *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

including the first and third collections of 1966 and 1976, appeared in 1992.<sup>7</sup>

Solesmes Abbey, and Lucien Regnault in particular, did a lot to popularize the *apophthegmata* in the French-speaking world by publishing books within everyone's reach. For example, in 1984 was published the small booklet *Abba Tell Me a Word*<sup>8</sup>, offering a selection of texts from all the collections published in different languages (Latin, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian, Georgian) and translated by Lucien Regnault, classified according to the main requests addressed to the elders by their disciples or the points that come up most often in their answers. This work has become a true guide for many contemporary Christians. It went through three editions.

In 2004, the managers of a Christian radio station in the South of France offered their listeners a word from the Fathers every morning for reflection, accompanied by a brief commentary by Lucien Regnault who underlined its current value and scope. The result was a work entitled *Listening to the fathers of the desert today*, which brings together some of these words, with the comments as they were given on the radio.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside these popular publications, the *apophthegmata* entered the prestigious scientific collection of *Sources Chrétiennes* in 1993, thanks to Jean-Claude Guy who prepared the edition and the French translation of the third collection of these sentences, the systematic collection in three volumes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Les Sentences des Pères du désert*, translated by Dom Jean Dion et Dom Guy Oury, introduction by Dom Lucien Regnault (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 1966); *Nouveau recueil. Apophthegmes inédits ou peu connus*, presented by Dom Lucien Regnault (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 1970); *Troisième recueil* (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 1976); *Collection alphabétique* (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 1981); *Série des anonymes*, translated and presented by Dom Lucien Regnault (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 1985); *Les chemins de Dieu au désert. La collection systématique des Apophthegmes des Pères* (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Regnault, *Abba dis-moi une Parole* (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 1984, 1999, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Regnault, *À l'écoute des pères du désert aujourd'hui* (Solesmes: Éd. de Solesmes, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Claude Guy, *Apophthegmes des Pères : collection systématique*, Sources Chrétiennes 387, 474 et 498, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993, 2003 and 2005).

## The different types of the sayings of the Desert Fathers

How to explain the resurgence of popularity of the sayings of the Fathers of the desert in the second half of the twentieth century, and that they have become best sellers? First, let us take a closer look at what they are. Jean-Claude Guy, in his introduction to the edition of the *Apophtegmes des Pères* distinguishes five main types of sayings:<sup>11</sup>

1) A dialogue between a disciple asking for 'a word of salvation' and an elder. These requests can be general or specific; they relate to an explanation of Scripture or asking for advice related to Christian living. For example:

A brother questioned Abba Poemen, saying: 'What to do?'. He said to him: 'When he entered the land of promise, Abraham bought a tomb for himself, and by this tomb he inherited the land.' The brother said to him: 'What is this tomb?'. And the old man said: 'The place of tears and compunction'.<sup>12</sup>

Or:

A brother said to Abba Sisoës: 'How is it that the passions do not depart from me?'. The old man said: 'Their instruments are in you; give them their deposit and they will leave'.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes this dialogue has been shortened to retain only the words of the elder. For example:

Abba John Colobos said to his disciple: 'Let us honor the Unique and all will honor us; but if we despise the Unique, that is to say, God, all will despise us and we are going to ruin'.<sup>14</sup>

2) In some cases, the word of salvation is not a personal response, but conveys a collective exhortation, echoing the tradition of the Fathers. For example:

Abba Isaac said to the brothers: 'Our fathers and Abba Pambo wore old garments all darned and woven of palm spathes; now you wear precious clothes? Leave here, you have turned these places into a desert'.<sup>15</sup>

3) Some *apophthegmata* transmit a lesson through a hagiographical narrative. For example:

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<sup>11</sup> Sources Chrétiennes 387 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993), 21-23.

<sup>12</sup> III, 28. SC 387, 164-67.

<sup>13</sup> X, 98. SC 474, 76-77.

<sup>14</sup> XI, 42. SC 474, 156-157.

<sup>15</sup> VI, 10. SC 387, 322-323.

A brother asked one of the fathers, 'How does the devil bring temptations to the saints?' The old man said to him: There was a father named Nikon on Mount Sinai. And a man going to the hut of an inhabitant of Pharan and finding his daughter alone sinned with her and said to her: 'Say that it is the anchorite, Abba Nikon, who has done this to me.' When the father came and heard it, he took a dagger and went to the old man. When he knocked on the door, the old man left. And brandishing the dagger to kill him, his hand became like wood. Then the man from Pharan went to the church and spoke to the priests, who summoned the old man. When he came, they inflicted many blows on him and wanted to chase him away. But he begged them, saying, 'Let me do penance here.' And they took him away for three years and ordered that no one should come to his house. So he spent three years coming every Sunday to do penance, begging: 'Pray for me.' Later, the one who had committed the fault and rejected the temptation on the anchorite was possessed by the devil and confessed to the church: 'It is me who have committed the fault and said to denounce the servant of God falsely.' And all the people went to repent to the old man, saying to him: 'Forgive us, abba.' He said to them: 'As for forgiving, be forgiven; but as for remaining, I no longer remain among you, for there has not been found any of you who has discernment to sympathize with me.' And so he departed from that place. And the old man said to the brother, 'Do you see how the devil brings temptations to the saints?'<sup>16</sup>

- 4) Some *apophthegmata* turn out to be long stories that tell of the virtuous lives of different Fathers.
- 5) Finally, other *apophthegmata* consist neither of words of salvation nor of stories, but are extracts from earlier works by Evagrius Ponticus, John Cassian, Mark the Hermit, Isaiah of Scetis or from lives of Saints.

### **The reasons for the success of the *apophthegmata***

The *apophthegmata* reveal a high level of spirituality based on the precepts of the Gospel, sometimes letting a touch of humor shine through. They illustrate renunciation of the world, spiritual combat, love of Christ, personal humility, love of neighbor, discretion, discernment, moderation, recollection, vigilance, prayer, etc. Christian life therein appears in its diversity and complexity. They are not only a testimony to the ascetic life of the origins of monasticism, but remain to this day a source of inspiration and a guide for Christians. For what reasons? I would propose five reasons.

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<sup>16</sup> XVI, 30. SC 474, 414-417.

1) Most of them are laconic. They are relatively short, and their brief message corresponds perfectly to the principles of contemporary communication, such as tweets. Indeed, any expert of communication would agree that in order to catch the attention of the public, a message should not exceed five minutes of human's attention. Thus, the simplicity and laconicity of the *apophthegmata* responds to that principle. Let me give an example:

Abba Anthony said: A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying: 'You are mad, you are not like us.'<sup>17</sup>

2) The laconic nature of the *apophthegmata* is due to the fact that they are pragmatic. They constitute concrete answers to concrete questions. One can say that they speak to the point, avoiding talkativeness. Contemporary men and women who seek an answer to existential questions, and do not have time to read extended and complicated philosophical or theological treatises, find tangible solutions in the sayings of the Fathers to their existential problems. One example is found in the sayings of Abba Arsenios:

Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness.'<sup>18</sup>

Or:

Abba Pambo asked Abba Anthony: 'What ought I to do?' And the old man said to him: 'Do not trust in your own righteousness, do not worry about the past, but control your tongue and your stomach.'<sup>19</sup>

3) Many *apophthegmata* make analogies or illustrate problems in a figurative way to make it clearer and more understandable. Let me quote one of them:

Abba John said of Abba Anoub and Abba Poemen and the rest of their brethren who come from the same womb and were made monks in Scetis, that when the Barbarians came and laid waste that district for the first time, they left for a place called Terenuthis until they decided where to settle. They stayed in an old temple several days. Then Abba Anoub said to Abba Poemen: 'For love's sake do this: let each of us live in quietness,

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<sup>17</sup> 'Anthony 25,' in Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> 'Arsenius 2,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> 'Anthony 6,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 2.



each one by himself, without meeting one another the whole week.' Abba Poemen replied: 'We will do as you wish.' So they did this. Now there was in the temple a statue of stone. When he woke up in the morning, Abba Anoub threw stones at the face of the statue and in the evening he said to it: 'Forgive me.' During the whole week he did this. On Saturday they came together and Abba Poemen said to Abba Anoub: 'Abba, I have seen you during the whole week throwing stones at the face of the statue and kneeling to ask it to forgive you. Does a believer act thus?' The old man answered him: '*I did this for your sake*. When you saw me throwing stones at the face of the statue, did it speak, or did it become angry?' Abba Poemen said: 'No.' 'Or again, when I bent down in penitence, was it moved, and did it say, I will not forgive you?' Again Abba Poemen answered: 'No.' Then the old man resumed: 'Now we are seven brethren; if you wish us to live together, let us be like this statue, which is not moved whether one beats it or whether one flatters it. If you do not wish to become like this, there are four doors here in the temple, let each one go where he will.' Then the brethren prostrated themselves and said to Abba Anoub: 'We will do as you wish, Father, and we will listen to what you say to us.' Abba Poemen added: 'Let us live together to the rest of our time, working according to the word which the old man has given us.'<sup>20</sup>

The throwing of stones at the statue, which surprised or even scandalized the brothers was an illustration or a figuration of the offences that one can do to his neighbor, which can irritate or make him or her angry. The fact that the statue did not respond illustrates that one should not respond to the harm one endures, not to respond to evil by evil. The act of asking forgiveness to the statue is a figuration that we should always ask for forgiveness from each other.

And here another example from Abba Arsenios:

Abba David said: 'Abba Arsenius told us the following, as though it referred to someone else, but in fact it referred to himself. An old man was sitting in his cell and a voice came to him which said, "Come, and I will show you the works of men." He got up and followed. The voice led him to a certain place and shewed him an Ethiopian cutting wood and making a great pile. He struggled to carry it but in vain. But instead of taking some off, he cut more wood which he added to the pile. He did this for a long time. Going on a little further, the old man was shown a man standing on the shore of a lake drawing up water and pouring it into a broken receptacle, so that the water ran back into the lake. Then the voice said to the old man, "Come, and I will show you something else." He saw a temple and two men on horseback, opposite one another,

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<sup>20</sup> 'Anoub 1,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 32–33.

carrying a piece of wood crosswise. They wanted to go in through the door but could not because they held their piece of wood crosswise. Neither of them would draw back before the other, so as to carry the wood straight; so they remained outside the door. The voice said to the old man, "These men carry the yoke of righteousness with pride, and do not humble themselves so as to correct themselves and walk in the humble way of Christ. So they remain outside the Kingdom of God. The man cutting the wood is he who lives in many sins and instead of repenting he adds more faults to his sins. He who draws the water is he who does good deeds, but mixing bad ones with them, he spoils even his good works. So everyone must be watchful of his actions, lest he labour in vain."<sup>21</sup>

4) In this way, the sayings of the Fathers are often paradoxical teaching and thus disconcerting. They challenge our habitual way of reasoning, break down the clichés, and challenge us to implement a way of living in conformity with the Gospel. Let me illustrate this by three *apophthegmata*:

One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one the old man said: 'You have not understood it.' Last of all he said to Abba Joseph: 'How would you explain this saying?' and he replied: 'I do not know.' Then Abba Anthony said: 'Indeed, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: I do not know.'<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, sometimes, acknowledging our ignorance is better than a false knowledge, and is certainly the best way to move forward. And another saying:

Three Fathers used to go and visit blessed Anthony every year and two of them used to discuss their thoughts and the salvation of their souls with him, but the third always remained silent and did not ask him anything. After a long time, Abba Anthony said to him: 'You often come here to see me, but you never ask me anything.' And the other replied: 'It is enough for me to see you, Father.'<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the best way to educate is not by saying many words, but by giving a good example. Thus, the wisdom of the desert is not a theoretical or philosophical knowledge that can be taught in a school,

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<sup>21</sup> 'Arsenius 33,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 15–16.

<sup>22</sup> 'Anthony 17,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> 'Anthony 27,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 7.

but practical, derived from a living faith, as it is explained by Abba Arsenios:

One day Abba Arsenius consulted an old Egyptian monk about his own thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, 'Abba Arsenius, how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?' He replied, 'I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant.'<sup>24</sup>

And one more that goes beyond all human logic and challenge all Cartesian minds:

It was said of Abba John the Dwarf that he withdrew and lived in the desert at Scetis with an old man of Thebes. His abba, taking a piece of dry wood, planted it and said to him, 'Water it every day with a bottle of water, until it bears fruit.' Now the water was so far away that he had to leave in the evening and return the following morning. At the end of three years the wood came to life and bore fruit. Then the old man took some of the fruit and carried it to the church saying to the brethren, 'Take and eat the fruit of obedience.'<sup>25</sup>

5) The disconcerting teaching of the *apophthegmata* is very often tinged with humor. Indeed, humor is often a pedagogical procedure used by the Desert Fathers in order to show their disciples the way to salvation. The saying of Agathon about the small green pea on the road is a good example:

Abba Agathon was walking with his disciples. One of them, finding a small green pea on the road, said to the old man, 'Father, may I take it?' The old man, looking at him with astonishment, said, 'Was it you who put it there?' 'No,' replied the brother, 'How then,' continued the old man, 'can you take up something which you did not put down?'<sup>26</sup>

Certain sayings depict a certain comedy of situation, made of eccentricity and humor. For example:

A brother asked Abba Daniel: 'Give me a commandment and I will keep it.' He replied: 'Never put your hand in the dish with a woman, and never eat with her; thus you will escape *a little* the demon of fornication.'<sup>27</sup>

And one more example, which brings us back to the necessity of orthopraxy:

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<sup>24</sup> 'Arsenius 6,' In Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> 'John the Dwarf 1,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 85-86.

<sup>26</sup> 'Agathon 11,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> 'Daniel 2,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 51.

Abba Abraham told of a man of Scetis who was a scribe and did not eat bread. A brother came to beg him to copy a book. The old man whose spirit was engaged in contemplation, wrote, omitting some phrases and with no punctuation. The brother, taking the book and wishing to punctuate it, noticed that words were missing. So he said to the old man, 'Abba, there are some phrases missing.' The old man said to him, 'Go, and practise first that which is written, then come back and I will write the rest.'<sup>28</sup>

These five principles certainly explain why the *apophthegmata* speak to contemporary men and women. But they certainly challenge them as well. In his introduction to the English translation of the alphabetical collection of the Sayings by Benedicta Ward, the late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom wrote:

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers has been for centuries an inspiration to those Christians who strove for an uncompromising obedience to the word and to the spirit of the Gospel; yet the modern reader, used to an intellectual, discursive way of exposition and also to greater emotional effusions in mystical literature may find this direct challenge difficult to face and even more difficult to assimilate and to apply to everyday life.<sup>29</sup>

We must not forget that the Fathers of the desert had abandoned everything to put themselves in the school of the Gospel lived in the harshness of the desert. This is not the case with our contemporaries living in the comfort of civilization. To this Anthony Bloom adds:

The first thing that strikes a reader is the insistence in the stress laid on the ascetic endeavour. Modern man seeks mainly for 'experience'—putting himself at the centre of things he wishes to make them subservient to this aim. [...] Such an attitude was unknown to the Desert, moreover, the Desert repudiated it as sacrilegious: the experiential knowledge which God in His infinite Love and condescension gives to those who seek Him with their whole heart is always a gift; its essential, abiding quality is its gratuity: it is an act of Divine Love and cannot therefore be deserved.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the egocentrism and selfishness of the contemporary human prevent him from discerning this gift of God. And Metropolitan Anthony concludes:

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<sup>28</sup> 'Abraham 3,' in Ward, *The Alphabetical Collection*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Bloom, 'Preface,' in Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, revised edition (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1984), xiii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii–xiv.

Yet many will be surprised by the insistence of the Sayings on what seem to be incredible feats of physical endurance. Are these at the centre of a spiritual life? Why not tell us more about the secret, inner life of these men and women? Because the life of the Spirit cannot be conveyed, except in images and analogies which are deceptive: those who know do not need them, and those who do not know are only led by them to partake imaginatively, but not really, in a world which to many is still out of reach.<sup>31</sup>

Human encounter with God in prayer and asceticism is a personal discovery that each person must make for him- or herself. The *Apophthegmata* show us the way. It is up to each person to undertake it. Nevertheless, the wisdom of the sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers continue to speak to and challenge contemporary men and women, and this no doubt explains the success they still enjoy today.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

## LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOUR: AN EVANGELICAL CHALLENGE OPEN TO VARIOUS SOLUTIONS<sup>1</sup>

**Norman Russell\***

*Asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus answers with the injunction to love God and one's neighbour (cf. Mark 12:28–31 par.). The tension inherent in this double commandment poses a constant challenge to Christians of all times. In this paper the author explores the teaching of the Desert Fathers as found first and foremost in the Apophthegmata Patrum, drawing out the abbas' different strategies for reconciling these two expressions of love.*

The tension between love of God and love of neighbour has been with us from the apostolic times. Take Luke's story of the busy Martha and the quietly listening Mary (Luke 10:38–42)—'Mary has chosen the better part,' says Jesus—yet it comes straight after the parable of the Good Samaritan, where a lawyer who had asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life was forced to admit that it was the Samaritan who proved to be a neighbour because he had shown mercy, and was told: 'Go and do likewise' (Luke 10:37). Or take John's story of Judas Iscariot's objecting to Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet—'Why was this perfume not sold [...] and the money given to the poor?'—to be told: 'You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me' (John 12:1–8). In both cases Mary's contemplative love is praised, but only after acknowledging the importance of practical love also.

Do we find this tension in the sayings of the Desert Fathers? Yes, but in a different key. The fathers whose *apophthegmata* have been assembled in the great collections, the alphabetical, the anonymous, and

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<sup>1</sup> An Italian translation of this paper will be published in the Proceedings of the 29<sup>th</sup> Orthodox Spirituality Conference (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2024).

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the systematic,<sup>2</sup> were solitaries who by definition were concerned with saving their own souls, or they would not have gone into the desert in the first place—though that is a statement that will need modification as we proceed. The eremitical life is often contrasted with more communal forms of monasticism. As John Climacus says, ‘there is the road of withdrawal and solitude for the spiritual athlete; there is the life of stillness shared by one or two others; there is the practice of living patiently in community’.<sup>3</sup> Yet the three are closely related. Pachomius, the founder of coenobitic monasticism, began his monastic life soon after his baptism as the disciple of a hermit called Palamon. After Palamon’s death he began himself to attract disciples, and gradually, as Philip Rousseau puts it, felt his way towards the establishment of ‘a community built upon mutual respect and mutual support’.<sup>4</sup> This was expressed by the community’s readiness ‘to encourage one another in the attainment of spiritual goals, and ultimately to accept responsibility for the interior development of their fellow monks’.<sup>5</sup> In times of crisis Pachomian monasteries were to become refuges for local people afflicted by famine or threatened by barbarian raids. But this was only incidental to their main purpose. The Bohairic *Life of Pachomius* has him declare in the very early days of his monastic vocation, when he was living the eremitical life near the village of Šeneset, ‘this service of

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<sup>2</sup> There is no critical text yet of the alphabetical collection, which is found in PG 65, 71–440. The best English translation is now by John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Popular Patristics series 52, (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2020). A select edition of the Greek text of the anonymous series with an excellent English translation of the complete text by J. Wortley has been published under the title *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The full Greek text of the systematic collection with a French translation by Jean-Claude Guy has been published in three volumes in the series Sources Chrétiennes (nos 387, 474, 498), as *Les Apophtegmes des Pères, collection systématique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993, 2003, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> *Ladder*, Step 1, PG 88, 641D; Eng. trans., Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, *John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Classics of Western Spirituality, (New York-Ramsey-Toronto: Paulist Press, 1982), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1985), 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

the sick in the villages is no work for a monk.<sup>6</sup> The whole point of the monastic life was spiritual ascent to God.

Such an attitude was not so different from that of the anchorites. They, too, had to be sensitive to the needs of others without at the same time becoming responsible for the needs of the Christian community as a whole—unless, like Dioscorus, one of the Tall Brothers of Nitria, they acceded to the wishes of the archbishop of Alexandria and became bishops.<sup>7</sup> In the *Apophthegmata* and related texts we have many instances of the care of the sick, the conversion of sinners, the reception of monastic and lay visitors, and so on, but the point of these stories is often to emphasise that acts of love are of benefit to the giver as much as the receiver. Thus, an abba asked to judge between two brothers, one of whom was capable of extraordinary feats of asceticism, whereas the other cared for the sick, replied: ‘If that brother who carries his fast for six days were to hang himself up by the nostrils, he could not equal the other, who does service to the sick.’<sup>8</sup> And John Kolobos, on being asked to take the trouble to go and edify a woman who ran a hostel for the monks of Sketis (presumably in Alexandria) but had resorted to prostitution in order to make ends meet, brought about her conversion with gentleness and kindness, thus demonstrating the wisdom (and continence) that God had given him.<sup>9</sup> And John Cassian, when he came with some companions from Palestine to visit an Egyptian abba and asked the abba why he did not continue to observe his rule of fasting as Palestinian monks would have done, was told: ‘Fasting is always with me, but I cannot always have you with me. And although fasting is a useful and necessary thing, it depends on our own will, whereas the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, citing the Bohairic (Coptic) *Life of Pachomius*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> See Norman Russell, *Theophilus of Alexandria*, *The Early Church Fathers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 177, n. 62. For another example of a monk appointed bishop (Serapion of Thmuis), see Antoine and Claire Guillaumont, *Evagre le Pontique, Le Gnostique* 47, *Sources Chrétiennes* 356, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1989), 185.

<sup>8</sup> Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères, collection systématique*, vol. 3, XVII, 22, *Sources Chrétiennes* 498, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf: 2005), 24. Also in Pelagius and John, *Verba Seniorum* (Book V of Heribert Rosweyde, *Vitae Patrum*, Antwerp, 1615), XVII, 18; Eng. trans. Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1936), 176.

<sup>9</sup> Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères, collection systématique*, vol. 2, XIII, 17.15–17, *Sources Chrétiennes* 387 (Paris : Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993), 246.



fulfilment of love is demanded of necessity by God's law.<sup>10</sup> The same principle is demonstrated by Theon, an anchorite living in a cell near Oxyrhynchus, who had practised silence as an ascetic discipline for thirty years, though Theon found a different solution. In his case, when he was visited by the party of Palestinian monks whose travels are narrated in the *History of the Monks of Egypt*, he was able both to keep his rule of silence and to be hospitable to his visitors through writing on a slate for them and giving thanks to God for their visit.<sup>11</sup>

Sensitivity to the priority of the other, and the concern not to shame them, could be taken to extremes. The story is told, for example, of an Abba John travelling with some brothers in the desert during the night led by a guide. It became clear to the party that the guide had lost his way. The brothers told Abba John that they should put the guide right, otherwise they might die in the desert. But John said that would shame and upset the guide. He preferred to pretend to be exhausted and needing to rest until daylight, when the journey could be safely resumed.<sup>12</sup> Such sensitivity is also expressed, sometimes very movingly, through a strong sense of solidarity with the brothers. For example, when 'a brother who had sinned was turned out of the church by the priest, Abba Bessarion got up and went out with him, saying: "I too am a sinner"' (a saying much loved by the late Metropolitan Kallistos Ware).<sup>13</sup>

We see the love of God and love of neighbour combined in a particularly characteristic manner in the way pilgrims and visitors were received. This is a topic which will be treated in a different paper. But I should like to dwell for a few minutes on the experiences recounted in *The History of the Monks of Egypt*. This text describes a tour by a party of seven monks from Palestine of the famous monastic centres of Egypt—not a literary fiction, I believe, but a tour actually undertaken

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, XIII, 2.6–10, 230; cf. John 12:8.

<sup>11</sup> André-Jean Festugière, *Historia monachorum in Aegypto. Édition critique du texte grec* VI, 3 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971); Eng. trans. Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (London: Mowbray, 1981), 68.

<sup>12</sup> Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères, collection systématique*, vol. 3, XVII, 10, 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Apophthegmata patrum, collectio alphabetica*, Bessarion 7, PG 65, 141BC.

in the winter of 394-5.<sup>14</sup> One member of the group composed a memoir of the visit, at the request of a community living on the Mount of Olives, for the profit of a wider monastic circle. 'For I have truly seen the treasure of God hidden in human vessels,' he says. 'I did not wish to keep this to myself and conceal something which would benefit many.'<sup>15</sup> The Palestinian group began their tour in the south, in Upper Egypt, with a visit to John of Lycopolis (the modern Asyut, a city still containing a large Christian population). John was reputed to possess the gift of clairvoyance, and indeed divined that one of the party was a deacon, even though he was trying to conceal it. The visit to John turned out to be one of the most satisfying of the tour and also one of the most revealing of the character of the abba. John greeted them 'like his own dear children after a long absence', marvelling at their zeal in coming to be edified, 'while we from laziness,' he says, 'do not even wish to come out of our cave'.<sup>16</sup> John, who was by then of great age and had lived as a recluse for forty years, usually just gave his blessing to visitors out of a window, but had nevertheless built up a great reputation as a wonder-working holy man. He tried to play this down to the Palestinians, attributing his reclusion to laziness. But the visitors were not fooled and spent three days listening to his teaching, hanging on every word. Other abbats were not quite so edifying. Copres, for example, an anchorite living in the desert in the region of Hermopolis (modern Bawit) was more interested in hearing news about the outside world until prompted to speak about his own life.<sup>17</sup> *The History of the Monks* reveals that there was an established pattern for receiving visitors especially at the larger monastic settlements. On arrival, their feet were washed and then the father who had performed this act (in imitation of Christ) sat them down and delivered a spiritual discourse to them followed by edifying stories about the old men who had preceded them. One of the fathers, Apollo, who governed a large number of hermitages in Hermopolis, 'frequently spoke about the reception of visitors, saying, "You must prostrate yourselves before brothers who come to visit you, for it is not them but God you venerate.

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<sup>14</sup> The date is indicated by the reference at *Historia monachorum* I, 64 to the emperor Theodosius I's defeat of the rebels Eugenius and Arbogast in September 394.

<sup>15</sup> Festugière, *Historia monachorum*, Prol. 3; Eng. trans. Russell, *Lives*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 20; Eng. trans. Russell, *Lives*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, X, 2; Eng. trans. Russell, *Lives*, 82.

Have you seen your brother? Says Scripture; you have seen the Lord your God.<sup>18</sup>

This last saying shares the same outlook as one about a brother who had two tunics, and when asked for alms by a beggar gave him the better one, saying to a questioner, 'Would you have wanted me to give the shabbier one to Christ?'<sup>19</sup> It resonates, too, with a maxim given by Evagrius in his treatise *On Prayer*. 'Blessed is the monk,' he says, 'who considers all people as god after God.'<sup>20</sup> In these sayings love of God and love of neighbour merge seamlessly. Each human being is created in the image of God. To honour that image is to honour God. And as St Basil, who had ordained Evagrius to the lectorate, says in a different context, the veneration given to the image ascends to the prototype.<sup>21</sup>

Evagrius was one of the most learned of the desert fathers, a brilliant deacon destined for high office who had got himself into trouble in Constantinople through a romantic attachment to a married woman. Fleeing the capital, he arrived in Jerusalem, from where he had been directed to Nitria by that formidable Roman matron, Melania the Elder. Interestingly, when Evagrius was visited by the group from Palestine, the main thing they took away from him, besides a general admiration for his philosophical and ascetical learning, was the injunction not to drink too much water, 'for the demons light on well-watered places'.<sup>22</sup> No doubt most of what Evagrius said went over their heads.

Evagrius was a monastic author of the first importance. Despite the condemnation of some of his ideas on the pre-existence of souls and the apokatastasis by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (held in Constantinople in 553), most of his works continued to be copied, either under his own name or that of Nilus of Ancyra, and have continued to be studied

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 55; Eng. trans. Russell, *Lives*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Collectio alphabetica*, Nistherous 4, PG 65, 308B; *Collectio anonyma*, Περὶ ἀγάπης 358; *Collectio systematica*, XV, 117.

<sup>20</sup> Evagrius, *On Prayer* 123, PG 79, 1193C; Eng. trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 206. Cf. 'A pure soul is god after God' (Evagrius, *Maxim* 2, 24 (23), PG 40, 1269B; Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 231.

<sup>21</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 18, 45, PG 32, 149C.

<sup>22</sup> Festugière, *Historia monachorum*, XX, 16; Eng. trans. Russell, *Lives*, 107. Cf. Evagrius, *Praktikos* (A. and C. Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique, Traité pratique ou le moine* I, Sources Chrétiennes 170, Paris 1971) 17; Eng. trans. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 101.

and commented on up to our own day. In order to write, Evagrius needed books, and books, as expensive items of property, were a contentious issue. We read, for example, in the *Apophthegmata*: ‘A brother said to Abba Serapion: “Give me a word.” The old man replied: “What can I tell you? You have taken what belongs to widows and orphans and put it in this niche.” For he saw that it was full of books.’<sup>23</sup> Evagrius himself reports a saying on the same theme in his *Praktikos*: ‘One of the brothers possessed only a Gospel book, and this he sold so as to feed the hungry, uttering this memorable saying: I have sold the word itself which said to me, “Go sell what you have and give to the poor” (Mt 19: 21).’<sup>24</sup> Evagrius clearly relished the irony!

The issue here, however, was not the tension between love of God and love of neighbour, or putting one’s own spiritual benefit before supporting the poor. It was the tension between attachment to material things and detachment from them, between keeping what one thought one needed for one’s support and practising the monastic virtue of *aktēmosynē*, non-possession, even to extremes. ‘Riches are the devil’s glue,’ says a saying from an Ethiopian collection.<sup>25</sup> Just as glue on a twig traps birds, so do riches catch the unsuspecting ascetic. And in an Egyptian context riches could be the simplest things like a staff or a second tunic, or they could be valuable objects like books. Evagrius may have treated non-possession as the laying aside of mental representations in prayer,<sup>26</sup> but an Ammos could praise ascetics who moved on from their cells leaving behind niches full of books written on parchment—not just on papyrus—with the doors hanging open.<sup>27</sup>

Intellectual riches could also provoke hostile comment. Once at a general assembly at Kellia (between Nitria and Sketis) Evagrius tried to make a point but received the sharp put-down: ‘We know, abba, that in your own country you would very likely have been a bishop and in

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<sup>23</sup> *Apophthegmata patrum, collectio alphabetica*, Serapion 2, PG 65, 416C.

<sup>24</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* (Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique, Traité pratique ou le moine 1*) 97; Eng. trans. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 113.

<sup>25</sup> *Eth. Coll.* 14, 14, from the Ethiopian *Collectio monastica* edited by Victor Arras (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1963); French trans. Lucien Regnault, *Les sentences des pères du désert. Nouveau recueil* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1970), 316.

<sup>26</sup> Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer* 70, PG 79, 1181C; Eng. trans. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 200.

<sup>27</sup> *Apophthegmata patrum, collectio alphabetica*, Ammos 5, PG 65, 128B.

charge of many, but now you are settled here as a guest.' Bowing his head, he replied in Job's words (and perhaps silently invoking Job's patience), 'I have spoken once, but will not speak again'.<sup>28</sup> Another highly educated monk, Arsenius, was more skilful than Evagrius in deflecting criticism. Arsenius had been tutor at the imperial palace in Constantinople to the sons of Theodosius I. He was highly valued by Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria, who used to send him distinguished visitors and himself paid him unwanted visits, which Arsenius tactfully repelled.<sup>29</sup> He played down his education, saying: 'We who have had a secular education possess nothing, but these Egyptian fellahin have acquired the virtues by their own labours'; and 'I have had a Latin and Greek education, but I have not yet learned the alphabet of this peasant'.<sup>30</sup> It is in this context, I think—his fear of becoming a 'must see' for distinguished visitors—that we should place Arsenius' apophthegm: 'I cannot be with God and with people.'<sup>31</sup>

Can the ascetic attain detachment in the degree required by the eremitic life without a total concentration on the self? The answer is a positive 'yes'. The Christian ascent to union with God is not a Neoplatonic 'flight of the alone to the Alone'. One of the greatest sins that is sometimes commented on in the *apophthegmata* and other texts is the egotism of the private quest for salvation. Some of the most striking sayings are related to this theme. 'If it were possible for me to find a leper and give him my body in exchange for his,' says Abba Agathon, 'I would be happy to do so. For that is perfect love.'<sup>32</sup> For the modern Greek philosopher, Stelios Ramfos, this saying of Agathon's (whether of a real person or of an emblematic figure) is the starting-point of a profound meditation on the relationship between ascetic effort and self-transcending love. Agathon once found a sick man abandoned to die in the market-place of the city where he went to sell his handiwork, and nursed him for four months until he recovered.<sup>33</sup> On another occasion he took care of a leper he found outside the city tending him with love.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Evagrius 7, PG 65, 176A, quoting Job 40:5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Arsenius 7, 8, PG 65, 89B.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Arsenius 5, 6, PG 65, 89A.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Arsenius 13, PG 65, 92A.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Agathon 26, PG 65, 116C.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Agathon 27, PG 65, 116CD.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Agathon 30, PG 65, 117CD.

Yet at the same time Agathon could say [says Ramfos]: 'If someone is dear to me and this becomes excessive and I realize that it is doing me harm, I break off relations with him.'<sup>35</sup> He understood that it was possible for love to be self-indulgent, to be a means of flattering and confirming the ego. For the spiritual dimension of love to remain uppermost it could not become an end in itself. It had to be a path leading to God, which means that the final end had to take precedence, not in a utilitarian way, but existentially, in the sense that the more we advance in love, the more we are transformed. We love by transcending ourselves, not by becoming submerged within ourselves.<sup>36</sup>

Becoming submerged within ourselves—that was the great danger of the solitary life according to both Evagrius and John Climacus.

Once, while engaged on some task, [says John,] I happened to be sitting outside a monastery and near the cells of those living in solitude. I could overhear them raging alone in their cells and in their bitter fury leaping about like caged partridges, leaping at the face of their offender as if he were actually there. My humble advice to them was to abandon solitary living in case they turned from human beings into devils.<sup>37</sup>

For John, to be submerged within oneself was to be caged up alone with one's anger and resentment. For Evagrius, it was to wallow in one's sexual thoughts and fantasies. For both John and Evagrius the remedy for those afflicted by these, while at the same time attempting to lead the solitary life, was the same: to return to the community.

If one is able to make progress in anachoresis [says Evagrius], let him prove himself; but if because of his inability he falls short of virtue, let him return to the community for fear that, being unable to counter the devices of the thoughts, he lose his wits.<sup>38</sup>

A brother who asked Abba Moses for a word was told: 'Go and sit in your cell, and the cell will teach you everything.'<sup>39</sup> Yet for many, solitude, especially if undertaken as a private quest for salvation (by which I mean a quest for union with God detached from any concern

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Agathon 23, PG 65, 116B.

<sup>36</sup> Stelios Ramfos, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness: Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. and abridged Russell (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 243–244.

<sup>37</sup> John Climacus, *Ladder*, Step 8, PG 88, 832A; trans. Luibheid and Russell, *John Climacus*, 148.

<sup>38</sup> Evagrius, *To Eulogios* 32, PG 79, 1140A; a better Greek text from Athos, Lavra Γ 93 is reproduced in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 333; Eng. trans. *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> *Apophthegmata patrum, collectio alphabetica*, Moses 6, PG 65, 284C.

for one's neighbour), was counter-productive. The love of God could often be best expressed and best encountered in the mutual support of community life—in the love of neighbour—as Evagrius and John Climacus both counselled.

I have referred to Evagrius a number of times because he was a desert father who not only features in the *apophthegmata* but was also an important writer himself on the spiritual life<sup>40</sup>—an abba who attempts to offer a gnoseological rationale for his personal experience. In his schema, the ascetic's practical life begins with perseverance in hope. From this comes abstinence, which leads to the fear of God, which itself leads to faith. From these three together, abstinence, fear of God, and faith, comes freedom from passion, which is the immediate prerequisite for love.<sup>41</sup> Love, in turn, leads to the knowledge of God and ultimate blessedness.<sup>42</sup> Evagrius sums this up aphoristically: 'Faith is the beginning of love; the end of love knowledge of God.'<sup>43</sup> For love, as he says, 'possesses nothing of its own apart from God, for God is love itself (1 John 4:8).'<sup>44</sup>

Love of neighbour and love of God for Evagrius are the same thing—love not so much in terms of the practical service of others as in terms of the expression of patience and forbearance, of not asserting oneself egotistically. Evagrius was not alone in this. The abbats did not see love of God and love of neighbour as conflicting goals, except perhaps when they needed to escape from the occasional importunate visitor motivated by curiosity to see a famous ascetic—the ancient equivalent of

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<sup>40</sup> There were several others, including Antony (corpus of seven *Letters*, but not surviving in Greek; see Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990), his disciple Ammonas (some letters and fragments, CPG 2380), and Isidore of Pelusium (large corpus of letters, PG 78), but none so important as Evagrius. A. Casiday (*Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, Cambridge 2013) points out that with the exception of *Letter* 63 all of Evagrius' works were written during his time at Kellia (28).

<sup>41</sup> In *To Eulogios* 21(23), PG 79, 1124C (also Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 325) Evagrius says that love and freedom from passion are *synapheia*, 'contiguous'.

<sup>42</sup> *Praktikos* (Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique, Traité pratique ou le moine* I) Prologue 8; Eng. trans. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 96.

<sup>43</sup> *To Monks* 3; Eng. trans. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 122. (For the Greek text of *To Monks*, first published in *Texte und Untersuchungen* 39 (1913), 143–65, see Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 115, nn. 2 and 3.).

<sup>44</sup> *To Eulogios* 21(23), PG 79, 1124C (also Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 325).

someone who wants to take a ‘selfie’ with a celebrity. If we are to look for different solutions, or perhaps we should say different strategies, among the abbas in reconciling these two expressions of love—in so far as they needed to be reconciled—I would say they are these:

First, on the level of ascetic discipline:

1. Putting aside one’s ascetic practices for the sake of a visitor;
2. Sensitivity to the priority of the other;
3. Self-identification with the other;
4. Yet not allowing love for the other to become self-indulgent;

Second, on the level of theological anthropology:

1. Regarding your fellow human being as created in the image of God, and therefore to be treated as a ‘god after God’;
2. Pursuing the ascetic life as the direct means of breaking down the egotistic barriers that separate created beings from one another and from God;
3. Seeing the love of neighbour within the context of the ascetic life as a means of entering into a transfiguring relationship with God, not as a hindrance to it;
4. Laying hold of this transfiguring relationship even in the present life.

Although the word ‘deification’ (*theopoiēsis*) is not used by any of the Desert Fathers (or perhaps we should say by the compilers of the *apophthegmata*), this is in fact the ascetic’s goal. Evagrius was no doubt familiar with explicit teaching on deification already established in the Christian tradition—he refers to himself as a disciple of Gregory of Nazianzus and calls Didymus the Blind ‘the great gnostic teacher’, both of them important teachers of deification<sup>45</sup>—but he prefers to regard the ultimate felicity exclusively as an eschatological reality.

True prayer may assimilate the monk to the angelic life [in Evagrius’ scheme], but ‘the knowledge beyond which no other knowledge exists’ transcends even the attenuated materiality of the angels and is attainable only on the ‘last day’, when the intellect sheds its covering of clay and makes the final transition from material knowledge to immaterial contemplation. ‘For only then,’ says Evagrius, ‘is our mind arisen, and awakened to sublime felicity, when it shall contemplate the “Oneness” and the “Aloneness” of the Word,’ which is the Father.’<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 157–61, 215–25.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 239, citing Ps.-Basil (Evagrius), *Ep.* 8, 7, PG 32, 256C–257A.



This intellectualist version of union with God would have meant very little to the majority of the Fathers, who had not had the education necessary to appreciate it. What they *could* appreciate was the visible evidence of transfiguration, and it was Arsenius, the other great desert intellectual but not (like Evagrius) a writer of theoretical analyses, who was one of the Fathers who supplied this:

A brother came to Abba Arsenius in Sketis, and looked through the doorway, and saw the old man wholly as fire. The brother was worthy of seeing this. And when he knocked the old man came out, and saw the brother in a state of amazement. And he said to him, 'Have you been knocking for a long time? You didn't see anything here, did you?' And he said, 'No'. And when he had spoken, he dismissed him.<sup>47</sup>

Another such father was Abba Joseph of Panephrisis:

Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot: 'You cannot become a monk unless you become wholly like a blazing fire.'

Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him: 'Abba, so far as I can, I perform my modest rule of prayer, and my modest fasting, together with prayer and study and stillness, and so far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What, then, is there still left for me to do?' The old man then rising to his feet, stretched out his arms to heaven, and his fingers became like ten fiery torches, and he said to him: 'If you want to, you can become wholly like fire.'<sup>48</sup>

This is the eschatological transfiguration of the perfect already anticipated in this life. And it is the product of an asceticism that does not distinguish between love of God and love of neighbour, for neither is possible without the other.

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<sup>47</sup> *Apophthegmata patrum, collectio alphabetica*, Arsenius 27, PG 65, 96C.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Joseph of Panephrisis 6 and 7, PG 65, 230CD.

## ‘BERNARD ALONE HAS GRASPED CHRIST.’ BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX AND MARTIN LUTHER<sup>1</sup>

Karl Gervin\*

Translated by Sr Ingeborg-Marie Kvam OP

*In the early twentieth century, the Lutheran theologian Adolf von Harnack claimed that ‘mysticism can never be made Protestant.’ Towards the end of the same century, Etienne Gilson expressed, from a Catholic point of view, that ‘Cistercian mysticism and Lutheranism are as opposed as fire and water’. These examples alone can explain why little attention has been paid, among Catholics and Protestants alike, to the relationship between the Reformer Luther and the mystic Bernard. This article is an attempt to show that exploring the connection between the two can be both intriguing and instructive.*

Around five hundred quotes from and allusions to Bernard are attested in Luther’s works, enough to show that the relationship is far from superficial and coincidental. At first glance, the contrasts between the two may appear more striking than the similarities. Even their physical appearances are quite different. Many a tale is told about Bernard’s austere way of life, while Luther was hardly of an ascetic nature. Both marked in significant ways a society and a church in times of change. Both criticised scholasticism—Bernard in its beginnings, Luther when its days of glory were over. Both were productive theologians with a vivid sense of language.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in Norwegian in *Segl* 2017. The author also held public lectures on the same topic in Troyes and Chaumont on the occasion of the nine-hundredth anniversary of the foundation of Clairvaux in January 2015, the text of which was published in the French newspaper *La Croix* in February 2015.

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## Bernard and the Beginnings of the Reformation

When the young Luther entered the monastery in 1505, he chose the strict Augustinians and met his day's Catholicism at its best. No more than today did the Catholic Church at that time teach that human beings are saved by their own good deeds: Salvation is a gift of God. Nevertheless, it was emphasised that men and women should prepare the ground by doing whatever is in their power—sincerely repent and love God. This was what Luther found impossible. He must have been a model monk, but his own experience was that he fell short and this troubled his soul.

It was then that one of his Brothers came to his aid and comforted him by saying that forgiveness of sins is granted by a person's faith. He added that this interpretation was confirmed by a saying of Bernard, pointing to a place in a sermon on Mary where the words are found: Your sins are forgiven you. You are justified freely by faith.<sup>2</sup>

Melanchton, Luther's close associate, records that the Reformer said he had been most consoled by this. Melanchton does not, however, mention which of Bernard's sermons Luther was aided by, but if we follow Luther further ahead, we will discover where in Bernard's works his gaze was fixed.

## Exegesis of the Book of Psalms

When Luther after a short time was called on to teach, his journey with the Book of Psalms began. Bernard appears already in his work on the interpretation of the Psalms in 1512 and in his lectures on the Psalms the following year. In his lectures, the young Augustinian monk quotes Bernard explicitly 24 times and implicitly 12–15 times. Five times he makes a direct reference and each time to one of the Cistercian's sermons.

The monastery of Erfurt, where Luther entered, had in its possession Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and his *Sermons for the Year*. Luther must also have been acquainted with his four sermons in praise of the Virgin, known in Latin as the *Super Missus Est*, but it may have been only indirect knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Melancthon, *The history of the life and acts of Luther (1547–8)*, prepared by Dr Steve Sohmer 1996, translated by T. Frazel 1995, <https://christian.net/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/melan/lifec-01.txt>, accessed on 29 January 2024.

Luther now explains the challenges of Christians—and of the Church—throughout history using, among other texts, Bernard’s sermons on what in Norwegian Bibles is Psalm 91<sup>3</sup>: He dwells in the shade of the Almighty. Luther concludes his second series of lectures on the Psalms by saying: ‘I see that *divus Bernardus* stands out in this art [of meditating on Scripture], and that he learnt the entire wealth of his erudition from it.’<sup>4</sup>

### The Epistle to the Romans and biblical interpretation

Luther’s lectures on the Epistle to the Romans coincide with his reforming breakthrough. Bernard’s role in this has often been ignored. Concerning Romans 13, Luther thoroughly and sincerely describes the problems in the Church. Among other things, he states that ‘Blessed Bernard is correct in the fourth book of his *De Consideratione*’<sup>5</sup> where he critiques these problems.

More important is Bernard’s appearance when the young doctor Martin is discussing the understanding of faith as being the guarantee of salvation. Bernard’s understanding of Romans 8 became key for Luther. In his lecture on this chapter he quotes Bernard’s *First Sermon on the Annunciation*. Here the Cistercian writes: ‘For human merits are not of such great worth as that therefore God is obliged in strict justice to reward them with eternal life [...] all our merits are themselves only the gifts of God.’<sup>6</sup> Luther quotes Bernard at length, saying e.g. ‘For it is necessary [...] to believe this, “because through him you are given the forgiveness of sins.” [...] For in this way the apostle believes that a man is justified by faith.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Norwegian Bibles use Hebrew numbering (translator’s note).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Psalms*, English translation: AWA 2:63,26f; quoted in Franz Posset, *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux*, Collected Works volume 2 (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, English translation: *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia*, Luther’s Works 25, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Walter G. Tillmanns and Jacob A. O. Preus (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 472.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *First Sermon on the Annunciation*, English translation: *St Bernard’s Sermons for the Seasons & Principal Festivals of the Year: Translated from the Original Latin by a Priest of Mount Melleray*, Vol. III (Westminster, MD: The Carroll Press, 1950), 135–136.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, English translation: *Lectures on Romans*, trans. Tillmanns and Preus, 360.

Likewise, Bernard's exposition of Romans 3 concerning justifying grace resonated with Luther. Bernard writes that the faithful are 'justified freely through grace by the work of Jesus Christ [...] we hold that man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.'<sup>8</sup>

This agreement between Bernard and Luther is really not all that surprising. Both are securely grounded in the tradition going back to Augustine. In his *Enchiridion*, a 'manual including only the essentials', Augustine writes using words that could easily have been chosen by the Lutheran Reformers as well: 'Men are not saved by good works, nor by the free determination of their own will, but by the grace of God through faith.'<sup>9</sup> Despite the unfortunate fact that the Church did not clearly preach this at the time of the Reformation, it should not be completely unexpected that the Vatican and the World Lutheran Federation in our own time together came to the conclusion that 'a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics.'<sup>10</sup>

As exegetes Bernard and Luther agreed on fundamental points. They held that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture. This is because the biblical word has an external clarity which can form the basis of faith, and an inner clarity which is the understanding of the heart.

Bernard, however, followed the monastic tradition of which he was a part, and employed a four-fold interpretation—which Luther rejected. Still, the Reformer may, as did Bernard, allow for a typological meaning where parallels are drawn between persons and events in the Old and the New Testaments—as Scripture itself does.

## Great Preachers

Luther several times expressed that, while he had reservations about much in the theological treatises of Bernard, he had great esteem for his sermons. Most of the quotes and citations from Bernard in Luther's

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<sup>8</sup> I have been unable to locate the citation, translation mine (translator's note).

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion* 30, [https://biblehub.com/library/augustine/the\\_enchiridion/chapter\\_30\\_men\\_are\\_not\\_saved.htm](https://biblehub.com/library/augustine/the_enchiridion/chapter_30_men_are_not_saved.htm), accessed on 29 January 2024. The quote is actually the title of the chapter, and is not found in all versions of the text (translator's note).

<sup>10</sup> The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* 40, <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Joint%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Doctrine%20of%20Justification.pdf>, accessed on 29 January 2024.

works come from these. Luther quotes Bernard more often than any other extra-biblical source and he continues to refer to him throughout his entire life. The citations are not always first-hand, and as Luther often cites rather freely, it is not always easy to know from which sermon or treatise the words are taken.

There are 86 extant sermons by Bernard on the Song of Songs and Luther used material from around 30 of them. Quotes from 26 of these sermons are used in total 125 times. The twentieth sermon on the Song, where Bernard, among other things, dwells on loving God, is used with particular frequency.

Luther also has 60 quotes from other sermons, with a predilection for the sermons for the different liturgical seasons. All in all, he refers to 18 of these explicitly and rather extensively. Luther was most impressed by Bernard's *First Sermon on the Missus Est* (for the Annunciation). He uses material from this text in one of his own sermons on John 3 (and this is the longest Bernard-quote in his works).

Bernard's four *Sermons in Praise of the Virgin Mother* did not, however, find favour with Luther.

## Mary

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, two characteristics of Bernard's spirituality came to the fore: his devotion to Mary and his emphasis on the Passion of Christ.

Although the early biographies hardly mention Bernard's Marian devotion, he was, at the end of the Middle Ages, known as the *doctor marianus*. Bernard had in many ways brought an intensification of the veneration of the Blessed Virgin in the Church. He said for example: 'Following her, you will not stray; invoking her, you do not despair; thinking of her, you do not wander; upheld by her, you do not fall; [...] favoured by her, you reach the goal.'<sup>11</sup> Bernard also proclaimed that we go through Mary to Jesus.

When the Reformation gained momentum in Germany, Luther had to seek shelter and it seems that it is during his stay in Wartburg that his preoccupation with Bernard is at its highest. Perhaps this is the background to his extensive commentary on the *Magnificat*, a com-

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard, *Second Sermon in Praise of the Virgin Mother*, English translation: The Liturgy of the Hours, Office of Readings 12 September, Second Reading, [www.universalis.com](http://www.universalis.com).

mentary little known by Lutherans, written as the storm raged all around him.

Eight times Luther repeats that Mary rightly is called the Mother of God. He holds that when Mary says 'all generations shall call me blessed', this is 'done with all one's strength and with downright sincerity, when the heart, moved by her low estate and God's gracious regard of her, as we have seen, rejoices in God and says or thinks with all its heart, "O Blessed Virgin Mary!"'<sup>12</sup>

Luther sees her as an icon of the Church and considers her to be Queen of Heaven, but holds that this expression should not be used because it easily lends itself to misunderstanding. He discusses Mary's Assumption into Heaven, but as Scripture is silent on this point, he leaves it an open question.

The Reformation was well under way at this stage. Luther, however, can still conclude his introduction to the commentary by saying: 'May the tender Mother of God herself procure for me the spirit of wisdom, profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers.'<sup>13</sup> It is an invocation of Mary—and years after his reforming breakthrough, he concludes: 'We pray God to give us a right understanding of this Magnificat, an understanding that consists not merely in brilliant words, but in glowing life in body and soul. May Christ grant us this through the intercession and for the sake of His dear Mother Mary!'<sup>14</sup>

It is striking how much of Luther's respect for Mary has gradually disappeared, in a Church that in many ways has become more Lutheran than Luther.

## Christ Alone

Regarding the crucial role of Christ, Bernard and Luther agreed in a way that few Lutherans, at least, are aware of. When they interpret Scripture, they both reach a conclusion which can be summed up as *solus Christus*.

Luther found Bernard's discourse on the Passion of Christ, conformity with Christ and following Christ, very appealing. These ideas were quite widespread in the late Middle Ages, and Luther may have taken

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<sup>12</sup> Luther, *On the Magnificat*, English translation: 'The Magnificat' in *The Sermon of the Mount and the Magnificat*, Luther's Works 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. A. T. W. Steinhäuser (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 324.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

inspiration from several sources. However, his closeness to the Cistercian is very notable when he combines Bernard's *Sermon 43* and *Sermon 61* on the Song of Songs, and presents Bernard as a primary authority on the Passion and Cross of Christ. In *Sermon 43*, Bernard says that the top and bottom of his theology is 'to know Jesus and him crucified.'<sup>15</sup>

Again and again Bernard returns to the Lord's Cross and Passion. Christ loved us first even though we were quite insignificant, indeed, nothing. In his treatise *On Loving God* the proximity to the Reformer is striking. Already in the first chapter he recalls that God 'gave Himself to us despite the fact that we were so undeserving.'<sup>16</sup> Then chapter after chapter remind the readers of how 'the faithful [...] know well how complete is their need of Jesus and of Him crucified.'<sup>17</sup>

Nothing suggests that Luther knew this treatise, but the understanding of Christ would have appealed to him. In the above-mentioned sermon on John 3, the Reformer says that '[h]e is the only one worthy of the name "Father Bernard" and of being studied diligently. [...] He does not try to satisfy the judgment of God with his cowl; instead he takes hold of Christ.'<sup>18</sup>

## Grace Alone

In the treatise *On Loving God*, Bernard asks with words from the Psalms: 'What shall I render to the Lord for all these things? Reason as well as natural justice impels that other [the infidel] to surrender his whole self to Him [...] I, forsooth, who hold that He is the Bestower not only of myself but even of His very Self as well.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard, *Sermon 43 on the Song of Songs* 4, English translation: Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II*, trans Killian Walsh OCSO (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications/London and Oxford: Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1976), 223.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard, *On Loving God* 1, English translation: *Saint Bernard on the Love of God*, trans. Rev. Terence L. Connolly S.J. Ph.D. (Techy, Illinois: The Mission Press S.V.D., 1943), 4.

<sup>17</sup> *On Loving God* 3. Ibid., 11.

<sup>18</sup> Luther, *Sermon on the Gospel of John*, English translation: *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4*, Luther's Works 22, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 388.

<sup>19</sup> *On Loving God* 5, Connolly (trans.), *Bernard on the Love of God*, 21.



It is striking that Bernard is not even close to mentioning any of the works of piety the Reformers so eagerly rejected. The point is that the one who 'gives praise to the Lord not because He is good to him but because He is good, he truly loves God for God and not for his own sake'<sup>20</sup>—that is, not to secure his own salvation.

No surprise, then, that Luther so often returns to and quotes Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs. The Cistercian uses the Song of Songs to recall that in the eyes of God, human beings have a double position—as he does in commenting on chapter 1 of the Song where the Bride says, 'I am black and beautiful.' The statement is close to Luther's *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously justified and sinner.

Bernard particularly uses the Song's images of Bride and Bridegroom. The Bride longs for the coming of the Bridegroom, and she does not expect this to happen based on her own merits. The idea could easily have been expressed during a Lutheran low-church service, though perhaps without the bridal symbolism Bernard so cherishes. Yet Luther did at times use the spousal imagery, for example in his central work *On the Freedom of a Christian*.

There is an important nuance in Bernard's words about the 'hoping' of the Bride. Luther would probably have highlighted more the certainty given to the faithful by confidence in the Lord's grace. Nevertheless, both emphasise that this grace kindles love in the human heart.

### Anthropology

It is unavoidable to mention that while Bernard wrote a small book on *Grace and Free Will*, Luther wrote two large and almost unreadable volumes *On the Bondage of the Will*.

Luther did not agree with Erasmus of Rotterdam who follows Bernard closely when he writes his *On Free Will*. Both are fully conscious of the fact that men and women do act in unbelievably foolish and wrong ways, and that their salvation depends wholly on the grace of God. They must, however, accept and say 'yes' to this grace. Luther, on the other hand, holds that after the Fall, the human will is in bondage and unless it is helped by God, it cannot but choose evil. This view was perpetuated in a certain kind of preaching, and so, the Catholic and Lutheran ways of speaking of and to human persons, have been different.

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<sup>20</sup> *On Loving God* 9, Connolly (trans.), *Bernard on the Love of God*, 36.

## Critique of the Church

There is no indication that Luther knew Bernard's *Apologia ad Guillaume*, but he would have rejoiced in Bernard's arguments here. Bernard's critique of the Church is expressed most comprehensively in *De Consideratione* and Luther quotes this treatise about fifteen times.

The monastery in Erfurt had a copy of *De Consideratione* in its library. Luther became familiar with the book at an early stage and mentions it already in his commentary on Romans in 1515—where he sings its praises. He turns to it again during his defence in Augsburg in 1518. At this stage, Luther says that if he is bold in his critique, 'I imitate St Bernard in his book concerning Considerations addressed to Eugenius'<sup>21</sup>.

*De Consideratione* includes a thorough critique of the papal curia and is addressed to the Cistercian Pope Eugene III. Luther holds that Bernard is right, both when he critiques the curia and when he widens his scope and considers the conduct of bishops as well. For 'they devote the greatest care to the least important matters and little or none to the most important.'<sup>22</sup>

## A Faithful Companion

Most of the quotes from Bernard occur in the works of the young Luther, but they are numerous even after the break with the Catholic Church was a fact. After 1521 Bernard's name is mentioned 300 times in Luther's lectures, sermons, letters and table-talks. In 1524 he writes: 'Saint Bernard was a man so lofty in spirit, that I almost venture to set him above all other celebrated teachers both ancient and modern.'<sup>23</sup>

There is no period in the life of the Reformer when Bernard is completely absent. He accompanies Luther through his whole career. In 1540, six years before he died, Luther returns to Bernard:

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<sup>21</sup> Luther, *Letter to Pope Leo X*, English translation: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1911/pg1911-images.html>, accessed on 30 January 2024. The letter dates from 1520, translator's note.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, English translation: *Lectures on Romans*, trans. Tillmanns and Preus, 473.

<sup>23</sup> Luther, *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, English translation: 'To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,' trans. H. Ashely Hall in *The Annotated Luther Volume 5: Christian Life in the World*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 264.

For when he is by himself in faith, then he teaches Christ most beautifully; he preaches on his benefits, sets the spirit on fire for the embrace of Christ; here then he is [all] roses and honey. On the other side, when he disputes about matters of law, then he disputes just like a Turk or a Jew who does not know Christ or who negates [Christ].<sup>24</sup>

### **Bernard's 'Last Words'**

Luther knew some of the stories circulating about Bernard, one of which recounts words supposedly spoken by Bernard on his deathbed, but actually written much earlier.

Luther said that he could paraphrase Bernard's words as follows:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that even if I have lived the best, I have still lived damnably. But I take comfort that You died for me and sprinkled me with Your blood from Your holy wounds. I have been baptized upon You and have heard Your Word through which You called me, granted me grace and life, and told me to believe. Trusting on this I will depart, but not with the uncertain and anxious doubting thoughts: O, who knows what verdict God in heaven will pronounce over me?<sup>25</sup>

It is disputed whether or not this was Bernard's evaluation of monastic life in general, but the most likely is that it is a judgement on his own life. For Bernard and Luther, the emphasis was on temptation and fall, reconciliation and salvation—in the knowledge that we all, in the end, will stand empty-handed before God.

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<sup>24</sup> Luther, *On Psalm 130*, printed in 1540, English translation: WA 40-III:354,17–24, quoted in Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, *Epistle for the Twelfth Sunday After Trinity* 42, English translation: *Church Postil V*, Luther's Works 79, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langerbartels (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 34.

## GRACEFUL ASCESIS, CHRIST AND THE CROSS: CARMELITE TEACHERS AND LUTHERAN DOCTRINE IN TODAY'S WESTERN WORLD

+ Dr Karin Johannesson \*

*There are striking similarities between Martin Luther's theology and the teachings expressed by the three Carmelite Doctors of the Church: Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. Therefore, the teachings of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus on grace can encourage a better understanding of the meaning of asceticism within the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition. In addition, St Teresa of Avila's accentuation of Christ's presence in creation and St John of the Cross' portrayal of the dark night of the soul can likewise enrich the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition and thereby exemplify what receptive ecumenism can contribute today.*

Since I was a teenager, I have been reading books written by Carmelites. It all started when there was a Christian bookstore in a town near where I grew up. In that bookstore, I bought books by Carmelites that were written in or translated into Swedish. What I read touched me and gave me a language that facilitated my conversations with God and my reflections on how God works in my life.

Later in life, I have given attention to Carmelite spirituality also in my academic work. As a philosopher of religion, I have taken an interest in the spirituality of the Carmelites because I believe that it can help us who belong to the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition to develop our doctrine in a way that will make it easier to meet the contemporary interest in spirituality. In this article, I will illustrate how the Carmelite nun Thérèse of the Child Jesus can contribute to the development of

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Martin Luther's theology. I will do this against the background of a certain trend in the Western world, referred to as the subjective turn, and a specific understanding of ecumenism.

### **The Subjective Turn**

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor believes that there is a clear tendency that currently permeates the Western cultural sphere.<sup>1</sup> This trend or tendency is the most influential cultural pattern in this part of the world, Taylor says, and he calls it 'the subjective turn'. In short, this trend or tendency means that we accord increasingly less trust to sources of authority in the form of a transcendent God, those who hold power, political agreements, or sacred texts. Instead, we increasingly put our trust in our own internal self, which we have come to gradually consider our main source of authority, to which we primarily listen. Whatever I do or believe should feel right to me; it should appeal to, or be an outflow of, what I consider my own deepest self, of the person I perceive that I am deep down. To find this deepest self and to develop it so that it permeates my life more and more is what we strive for today, and that changes the preconditions for the practice of religion, so Charles Taylor believes.

Whatever we human beings value the most we happily perceive as holy and connected with God or a divine reality. This subjective turn can therefore be said to imply that the deepest self of the human being and her inner life is increasingly presented as divine, at least to some extent. Some scholars believe that the subjective turn could be described as if God, the sacred or highest source of authority moves into the human being. In that sense, the inner life of the human person becomes divine.<sup>2</sup>

In the field of religion, the subjective turn expresses itself as an increasing interest in spirituality.<sup>3</sup> People take an interest in religious activities, which they can experience as an opportunity to live in contact with a deep dimension of their human existence. Some examples of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Anders Edgardh Bäckström, Ninna Beckman and Per Pettersson, *Religious Change in Northern Europe. The Case of Sweden* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2004), 101.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

such activities include yoga, pilgrimage walks, meditation exercises and retreats. This interest is noticeable both within our churches and outside, in the community at large.

You could say that there is now a travelling trade that concentrates on offering exciting adventures or alluring discovery trips into our own inner selves. This is an expression of the subjective turn. Some organizers speak of spirituality in their marketing and with that concept they usually refer to a deep dimension of human existence that turns towards, or is directed towards, something that some of us would describe as a divine reality. Among such agencies on the Swedish market are some well-known secular companies and organisations. The Swedish Tourist Association and the Gym Company Friskis & Svettis for example, nowadays offer pilgrimage walks with aspects of spiritual guidance.

### **Contemporary Interest in Spirituality as an Evangelical-Lutheran Challenge**

It is not only secular companies and organisations that seek to meet the contemporary quest for spirituality. Churches and denominations also offer pilgrimage walks, retreats, and meditation groups. In my research, I have investigated how we, Evangelical-Lutherans, can offer such activities without renouncing our own doctrinal developments. I have worked on the question of how spiritual training can be understood as something to be recommended within the framework of a tradition whose central dogmatic position is that the human being can do nothing whatsoever to draw closer to God.<sup>4</sup>

That spiritual training is something that can be encouraged and maybe even ought to be stimulated appears as anything but self-evident within the framework of the theological perspectives that Martin Luther developed. The lack of self-evidence has to do with Luther's rejection of some views about the free will of human beings. In the Christian tradition, spiritual training has traditionally been named *ascesis*. The recommended *ascesis* has been limited to activities that

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<sup>4</sup> Karin Johannesson, *Helgelsens filosofi. Om andlig träning i luthersk tradition [The Philosophy of Sanctification. On Spiritual Training within the Lutheran tradition]* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2014). I summarize the most important arguments and conclusions in Karin Johannesson, 'The Holy Spirit and Lutheran Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century,' *Seminary Ridge Review*, vol. 18, no 2:1-15.

have been considered to contribute to a desirable growth of the Christian person. This growth has in turn been characterised with the aid of the concept of *sanctification*. In various Christian traditions the sanctification of the human being as well as the content of good ascesis have been presented in somewhat different ways. The view that the human being can contribute to his or her own growth as a Christian by choosing to engage in recommended ascetic practices or spiritual exercises has usually been a common basic idea.

That basic pre-condition is questioned by Martin Luther. Luther's rejection comes to its most clear expression in his position about the bondage of the human will. This position has to do with what many people perceive as the centre of Luther's theology, namely the primacy of grace. If, as Luther believes, the human being lacks any possibility of turning to God and to increasingly opening up to the work of God in his or her life, this implies that certain ideas about the significance of ascesis and of the sanctification of human beings must be rejected. Ascesis or spiritual exercises cannot be understood as activities that a human being can choose to engage in for the purpose of drawing closer to God or of growing in holiness.

The question that I ask myself is how ascesis and spiritual exercises can be understood within the framework of Evangelical-Lutheran development of doctrine. Is it at all possible to recommend any form of spiritual training if you represent the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition? If that is not possible, there is a great risk that the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition might quite simply become extinct since it is not able to appeal to spiritually interested people who live in the cultural sphere of the subjective turn.

Since I am very keen that my own tradition should survive and develop in a way that will make it fruitful and true, even in a spiritually searching contemporary world, I have taken an interest in the question of what can be said to characterise Evangelical-Lutheran spirituality. What does the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition have to offer contemporary spiritually searching people? When the American Professor Kirsi Stjerna discusses this matter, she highlights in an exemplary way the essential aspects of Evangelical-Lutheran doctrinal development

that can help people to meet God today.<sup>5</sup> In my book on Thérèse and Martin, I have used a complementary method of working. I have related Evangelical-Lutheran doctrine to the Carmelite tradition, and I have investigated how Evangelical-Lutheran tradition can develop by being enriched by insights from the Carmelite tradition of spirituality.<sup>6</sup> My purpose has been to help my own church to meet the contemporary interest in spirituality in a constructive manner, and my approach exemplifies the perspective or the method that may be called receptive ecumenism.

### **Receptive Ecumenism**

Receptive ecumenism is a ‘hot’ trend in contemporary ecumenical research. The concept is primarily linked to the British Professor Paul D. Murray, and it stands for a fresh starting point within ecumenism.<sup>7</sup> Rather than holding doctrinal conversations or lectures, of which the goal might easily become the achievement of the least common denominator that everyone can agree on, the focus here is on the possibilities one’s own tradition has of dealing with challenges through dialogue with other traditions. That is the starting point of receptive ecumenism, and it encourages an honest and committed search in relation to questions or issues that are experienced as crucial and relevant.

Inspired by the approach of receptive ecumenism, I have reflected on how the spirituality of the Carmelite Order can help us of an Evangelical-Lutheran tradition to deal with the challenge of endorsing some kind of Evangelical-Lutheran spiritual training. In *On the bondage of the will* Luther stresses that human beings can do nothing whatsoever by themselves to establish or maintain the good and life-giving relationship to God. The idea that a human being could do something on his or her own—for example to say ‘Yes’ to God in some way, or turn to God—entirely ruins the idea that human beings are justified by grace

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<sup>5</sup> Kirsi Stjerna, ‘Luther, Lutherans, and Spirituality,’ in Kirsi Stjerna and Brooks Schramm, *Spirituality. Towards a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Lutheran Understanding* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2004), 32–49.

<sup>6</sup> Karin Johannesson, *Thérèse and Martin. Carmel and the Reformation in a New Light* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Paul D. Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning, Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).



alone, and is an expression of that justification by deeds that Luther abhors.<sup>8</sup> The question that I ask myself is whether this position completely undermines all possibility of our being able to recommend any form of ascesis or spiritual exercises. The Carmelite nun St Thérèse of the Child Jesus would answer 'No' to that question, and that makes her very interesting in this context. She is in full agreement with Martin Luther that a person's relationship to God is completely dependent on the grace of God, but she expounds that thought in a different way than he does.

### **Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Little Way**

Thérèse of the Child Jesus was born in France in 1873 as the youngest child in a family with a unique monastic history. Altogether, Thérèse's parents had nine children. Five of the daughters reached adulthood and all five entered religious orders. Four of the sisters became Carmelite nuns at the Convent at Lisieux, while the fifth sister entered the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary at Caen.

The history of the Carmelite Order says quite a lot about the spiritual ideals of the order. Unlike many other monastic orders, the Carmelite Order has no known founder. The Carmelites appear as a community of hermits on Mount Carmel towards the end of the twelfth century. Brothers who found their spiritual ideal embodied in the Prophet Elijah, in him who did his utmost for God, lived there as hermits. They built a little church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, because they wanted to live their lives under her protection. In the early thirteenth century, the hermits of Mount Carmel turned to the Patriarch Albert of Jerusalem because they realised that they needed to organise their community in some way. Previously, they had not had very much contact with one another, and their way of life had been transmitted to newcomers by oral traditions. Now the Patriarch wrote a rule for the community. The emphasis in this rule is on solitude, silence, and unceasing prayer. The dispersed hermits came together under the leadership of a prior and the existence of the Carmelite Order was officially confirmed by the Pope in 1226.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the brothers were forced to move to Europe, since the fighting between Christians and Muslims

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, 'On the Bondage of the Will,' in *Luther and Erasmus. Free Will and Salvation*, E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (eds) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 288–292.

made it impossible for them to continue their religious life on Mount Carmel. In 1291 the monastery on Mount Carmel was invaded and the remaining brothers were murdered. By then, Carmelite monasteries had been founded in France, England, Italy, and Germany. The Order continued in its contemplative character when moving to Europe, but now the monasteries were usually established in towns and cities rather than in remote mountainous areas. The task of assisting people by giving spiritual guidance thus became more articulated.

St Thérèse of the Child Jesus entered the Convent of the Carmelite Sisters at Lisieux in 1888 and she remained there until her death in 1897. She died of tuberculosis, 24 years old, and it is said that one of the nuns in the convent imagined that it would be hard for the prioress to write an obituary of the departed Sister, since she had not experienced very much. It turned out that she was wrong. Thérèse continuously gains new biographers. The reason is that she herself, towards the end of her life, wrote some autobiographical texts that were published posthumously. The guidance that she gives through her writings has made her one of the most beloved saints of the Roman Catholic Church. St Thérèse of the Child Jesus was beatified in 1923 and canonised two years later.

St Thérèse has become famous, primarily because of the Little Way to God that she discovered. In her autobiography, she says that she had always wanted to become holy, but when she compared herself to the saints, she has always noted that there is the same difference between them and her as there is between a sky-soaring mountain and a minute grain of sand that you trample underfoot. However, she never lost her hope of holiness. She thought that God could never induce desires in us that God is not able to realise. From this she concluded that we can, despite our lowliness, strive for holiness. She realised that it was impossible for her to make herself greater or more perfect. She had to accept to be the way she was, including all her deficiencies. She decided to seek out a way to come to heaven along a small, straight, and short path, and she found what she describes as an entirely new Little Way.<sup>9</sup>

The discovery of that Little Way means that human beings should not seek to become greater and to achieve more, but instead to become smaller. We should let ourselves be emptied to be able to receive more

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<sup>9</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2017), 207.

of God's grace. When Thérèse was a child, her older sister Pauline had explained to her how the grace of God fills every human being. She had taken their father's large cup and Thérèse's little thimble and filled them both with water. Both vessels were over-flowing, but because there was more room in the cup than in the little thimble, there was room for more water in the cup. Thérèse understood the point. The greater the emptiness there is inside a human being, the more grace God can fill her with.<sup>10</sup>

It seems that Pauline, who later became Thérèse's Prioress in the Carmelite Convent at Lisieux, also gave Thérèse another image that she used to explain what the discovery of the Little Way means. She speaks of the Little Way as a ride in a divine elevator when she writes: 'We are living now in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, an elevator has replaced these very successfully.' She continues: 'I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection. I searched, then, in the Scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires, and I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: "*Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me.*"' (Prov. 9:4). Thérèse sensed that she was about to discover something important, and she continued her search. '[T]his is what I discovered: "As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; you shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you."' (Is. 66:12-13). That verse opened the mystery of grace for St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, who exclaimed,

Ah! Never did words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to my soul. The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain *little* and become this more and more.<sup>11</sup>

### **St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Grace and Asceticism**

Like Martin Luther, St Thérèse of the Child Jesus was very conversant with the Biblical Scriptures, and she very much liked the letter which catalysed Martin Luther's reforming discovery. In her prayer book she kept a little note that brought together two passages from the Letter to the Romans:

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<sup>10</sup> Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, 207-208.

Blessed are those whom God reckons as righteous regardless of any deeds. Whoever has deeds to point to will receive his wages, not as a gracious gift but as a due. But without having any merits, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Just before she died, Thérèse meditated on another Biblical word, to which she gave a very Lutheran interpretation. Thérèse was very glad soon to be departing for heaven, 'but', she says,

when I think of these words of God: 'My reward is with me, to render to each one according to his works,' (Rev. 22:12) I tell myself that He will be very much embarrassed in my case. I haven't any works! He will not be able to reward me 'according to my works.' Well, then. He will reward me 'according to His own works.'<sup>13</sup>

Thérèse's interpretation of the verse from the Book of Revelation is a pregnant summary of Luther's understanding of the justification of the human being, but Thérèse did not know that. She was just as unaware of Martin Luther's theology as he was of hers.

'Everything is a grace'.<sup>14</sup> That is how St Thérèse of the Child Jesus towards the end of her life summarises the Little Way that God in his grace had allowed her to discover. That could also have been Martin Luther's summary of the reforming discovery that he had made, but he did not use that exact formulation. Even though St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and Martin Luther both stress the primacy of grace, they do not present the importance of ascesis and spiritual exercises in the same way. The differences are thought-provoking, and they can best be described against the background of a misleading understanding of the teaching of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

It happens that the Little Way of St Thérèse is expounded in a way that reminds us of the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his criticism of what he describes as 'cheap grace'<sup>15</sup>. The cheap grace brings no obligation and does not invite to discipleship. It leaves everything as it is and assures human beings that everything is well with them and

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<sup>12</sup> Koen De Meester, *Med tomma händer* (Glumslöv & Tågarp: Karmeliterna, 1987), 87. Thérèse links together Rom. 4:4-6 and Rom. 3:24.

<sup>13</sup> Thérèse, *Her Last Conversations* (Washington DC: ICS Publications), 43 (May 15, point 1).

<sup>14</sup> Thérèse, *Her Last Conversations*, 57 (June 5, point 4).

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Cost of Discipleship,' in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Writings Selected with an Introduction by Robert Coles* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

their relationship to God, even when that is not the case. Sometimes the Little Way is presented as cheap grace. Then it is stressed that we do not need to do anything because everything is a grace, and God loves us quite regardless of what we get up to. Such an exposition of Thérèse's teaching is built on a misunderstanding. Thérèse does not conclude that nothing that we do makes any difference, since everything is a grace. Rather, she believes that everything we do makes a difference because everything is a grace. That everything is a grace means that every little thing that we do, every little word that we speak and every little thought that we think are divine matters.

The Swedish Carmelite Wilfrid Stinissen has pointed out that the importance of asceticism in the teaching of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus is sometimes toned down in a misleading way.<sup>16</sup> Thérèse's life was formed by grace, which brought her out of the circulation around her own self into a deep-reaching care of other people. This is the same pattern of movement, Martin Luther believes, that God achieves in our lives by grace. The asceticism that Thérèse recommends can be described as small everyday tips which, by the help of grace, can liberate us from our self-absorbed turning away from God.

Thérèse advocates, for example, that we should practice our ability not to worry about what other people may think and feel about us. She also suggests that, whenever anyone makes an unpleasant comment about another person, we should neither agree with what was said nor correct the person who made that comment. We should instead, in all simplicity, mention some good quality in the person spoken about. Thérèse's sister Céline, who was one of the novices whom Thérèse introduced to religious life, speaks of an event that can be said to summarise the basic stance of the asceticism that Thérèse recommends. In the convent, there was an old Prioress who was very sensitive to scents. One day, when Thérèse was busy placing a beautiful rose by a statue of the Child Jesus, the old lady called her attention. Thérèse understood what she was about to say and considered for a moment letting her present her complaint. That would give Thérèse the chance to correct the old Prioress by pointing out that the rose that she held in her hand was artificial. Thérèse however changed her strategy. She exclaimed loudly and happily, 'See, Mother how well they imitate nature now-

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<sup>16</sup> Wilfrid Stinissen, 'Om Thérèse's andliga utveckling,' in *De svagas styrka. Om Thérèse av Jesusbarnet* (Glumslöv & Tågarp, Karmeliterna, 1998), 47–50.

adays! Wouldn't you think that this rose had just been gathered from the garden?"<sup>17</sup> By preventing the older nun, she helped her to avoid making an unpleasant comment quite unnecessarily. Thérèse herself avoided the sin of pride that would find pleasure in the short-comings and faults of another person.

### **St Thérèse as a Spiritual Guide in Temptations and Scruples**

Thérèse's understanding of the importance of grace and asceticism grew out of a personal struggle that reminds us of that of Martin Luther. Like Luther, St Thérèse of the Child Jesus struggled with excessive scruples during a period of her life. She had a deep longing for holiness and a very sensitive conscience. That sometimes gave rise to excessive feelings of guilt and painful sorrow about her own inability. Thérèse's scruples are reminiscent of the anxiety-filled stage of development that is usually described as Martin Luther's 'monastic struggle'. What distinguishes Thérèse's scruples from Luther's monastic struggle is the basic chord. Martin Luther was terrified of the wrath of God. Thérèse's scruples were rather connected with the love of God. She did not want to hurt God, who loved her so much.

One can ask and answer the question why there are these variances from several different perspectives. The Carmelite Marc Foley, who has written on the scrupulosity of Thérèse, is interested in what he calls 'the context of holiness', i.e. the psychological, social, and spiritual environment that formed St Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Foley emphasizes that all people live in a context of holiness that is marked by specific circumstances. It is in that context that God, in various ways, seeks to help us to grow in communion with God, in Christlikeness or holiness.<sup>18</sup> Thérèse grew up in a family whose members are nowadays pictured on icons and devotional candles. Her childhood was marked by love of God and of the family. That made her able to handle the terrifying anxiety in the face of God's greatness that can affect us all now and again, in a different way from what Martin Luther was able to do.

You could ask what might have happened if Martin Luther would have had St Thérèse of the Child Jesus as his partner in dialogue rather

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<sup>17</sup> Geneviève of the Holy Face (Celine Martin), *My Sister Saint Thérèse* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1997). The incident with the rose is mentioned on pp. 129–130.

<sup>18</sup> Marc Foley, *The Context of Holiness. Psychological and Spiritual Reflections on the Life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2008).

than Jacob Latomus, Johann Eck and Cardinal Cajetanus. How could her spirituality have helped him to sort out both his feelings and his doctrine? There is a hint of an answer in Thérèse's farewell letter to a young priest, Abbé Bellière, for whom she had special pastoral care. He suffered from temptations that were similar to the anxiety-filled struggle in the face of God's greatness and his own insignificance which Martin Luther was struggling with. Towards the end of her life, Thérèse wrote two farewell letters to him. Thérèse encourages Abbé Bellière to crawl into the arms of Jesus with the same confident trust that small children show when they crawl into the arms of adults that they trust. 'I beg you,' she writes, 'do not *drag* yourself any longer to *His feet*' but 'follow that "first impulse that draws you into His arms." That is where your place is'.<sup>19</sup> The Little Way is that the soul is 'called to raise itself to God by the ELEVATOR of love and not to climb the rough *stairway* of fear'.<sup>20</sup> The courage needed is the courage to come before God with 'empty hands'.<sup>21</sup> That courage, St Thérèse believes, we can, by the help of grace, increase by the practice of asceticism and spiritual training in our very ordinary daily lives.

I believe that we, who are Evangelical-Lutheran, can learn something from St Thérèse of the Child Jesus that we would find useful and joyful in our encounter with contemporary people who are interested in, or longing for spirituality. St Thérèse's exposition of grace lacks the opposition or the tension between God's grace and human activity that is often stressed in the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition. Thérèse is not interested in the question of who does what in the love relationship between God and human beings. She thinks that Jesus and the human being do everything together and she believes that the question about the exact division of the labour is uninteresting. Martin Luther, on the other hand, is particularly interested in that issue, since he believes that it is the determining question. I believe that St Thérèse of the Child Jesus' lack of interest could be liberating for us who stand in the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition. If we can experience everything as a grace—including our ascetic exercises—we do not have to preach any cheap grace for fear of the horrors of justification by deeds. In a similar

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<sup>19</sup> Letter to Abbé Bellière, July 26, 1897. Thérèse, *Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, vol. II (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1988), 1164 (LT 261).

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Abbé Bellière, July 26, 1897. Thérèse, *Letters*, vol. II, 1152 (LT 258).

<sup>21</sup> Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, 276–277 (Act of oblation, June 9, 1895).

way, I believe that we can gain other essential insights from the teachings of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, two Carmelites who were living in Spain in the sixteenth century. Like St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, they are both canonised saints and Doctors of the Church. They can contribute to receptive ecumenism by expanding our reflections on the relationship between spirituality and doctrine.

### **Creation Theology**

Carmel's Doctors of the Church can also be appreciated as teachers by us because they understand the central tenets of justification by faith alone, by grace alone and by Christ alone in ways that are in line with Martin Luther's theology. Within the framework of that understanding, they expound certain themes which some of us think Luther ought to have paid more attention to, namely how human growth in faith and holiness can be formed and expressed. In our secularised and spiritually interested contemporary world those themes are highly relevant. St Thérèse of the Child Jesus can help us who stand in the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition to develop a spiritual theology that orbits the issue of how we can encourage spiritual training and at the same time avoid the deathly idea of justification by deeds. This is an example of how the Carmelite tradition of spirituality can enrich Evangelical-Lutheran theology. Another example that illustrates how Carmelite spirituality can contribute to Evangelical-Lutheran theology can be developed in dialogue with St Teresa of Avila and her perspective on creation.

In the Church of Sweden, we use the term 'creation theology' remarkably often. 'Creation theology' is a theme that many associate with Nordic theology. By that term, we usually refer to something that all people might be affected by—regardless of their faith. The concept suggests that there is another form of theology—'salvation theology'—that to a greater extent, or even exclusively, affects some people. St Teresa of Avila thinks along other lines. Her descriptions of the relationship between human beings and Jesus Christ lacks any clear distinction between the relationship between human beings and God through creation and the relationship to God concerning the salvation of human beings. To her, creation theology is always salvation theology. Salvation is therefore also proclaimed to creation at large. She assumes that people can encounter Christ through creation, and therefore she can present God's address through nature in a very Christocentric manner. It is not only the back of God that we see when we look at



nature. We can also encounter Christ and hear him speak through flowers, stars, and waters.

I believe that we have something to learn from St Teresa of Jesus. Our dichotomising between creation theology and salvation theology often faces us with the question of how to add Jesus into our preaching when it is aimed at a wider circle. We assume that people who do not see themselves as practising Christians find our message about Jesus difficult. St Teresa does not share that assumption at all, because in her world of perception, Jesus belongs to what we consider to be creation theology. That makes her very confident in her proclamation. Every human being is inhabited by Christ—even if she does not know it. The task of the Church is to help people to discover that they are not empty inside. Within every human being, there is Jesus. He knows the person and he wants her to get to know him even better.

### **Theology of the cross**

The continuity between creation and salvation can also be found in the way in which St John of the Cross understands our development of faith. St John assumes that all people have at least an embryo of faith that can grow and develop through baptism and through the process or stage of development of faith that he describes as the dark night of the soul. The dark night of the soul can most easily be described as the breaking point between what Martin Luther calls the theology of glory and what he describes as the theology of the cross. To begin with, the life of faith of a human being is often a joyful walk from clarity to even greater clarity. Faith is a resource in the life of a person that makes her see her existence in a new and clearer light. St John of the Cross believes that, if all goes well, God will bring the human being closer to God by allowing her to go through a process of purification that will appear to her as darkness. The purpose is to liberate the person's trust in God from selfishness. She should not trust in her own ideas about the faith, nor in her own experiences, but in God alone. When St John expounds the significance of the dark night of the soul, he, like Martin Luther, emphasises that God meets us and carries us through suffering and difficulties. He stresses the naked trust in the promises that God fulfils through Jesus Christ in a way that is reminiscent of Martin Luther's theology of the cross. However, St John's theology of the cross does not include the same opposition between happiness and sadness that Martin Luther regularly expounds in his pastoral letters to people who

suffer from melancholy. Simply expressed, not all anxiety is the work of the devil according to St John of the Cross, while Martin Luther often perceives the matter in that way.

St John underlines instead that anxiety and worry can be both something that God does not want the human being to suffer from and something that God can use to bring the person closer to God. For many people who are downcast or depressed that message can be a comfort that will make them take a more constructive attitude towards the thoughts and feelings that torment them. The pain and the darkness could be a means of God's care, even though it does not feel like that. Martin Luther is thinking along the same lines, but he often describes an 'either-or' relationship instead. In Church of Sweden practice, these circumstances can sometimes result in an excessive focus on being nice. The message easily becomes that in the church we may be joyful.

I have nothing against joy in the church, but sometimes I wonder whether we undermine people's confidence in us as a church by always sending out that message. I personally believe that this ecclesiastical 'being nice' needs to be accompanied by the insight that God can make people worried and anxious—and that is quite all right. In our contemporary society, we can learn something important from the teaching of St John of the Cross about the dark night of the soul, since he can help us to reflect more extensively on the growing problem that we struggle with today in the Western world, namely increasing mental ill-health. St John of the Cross stresses that the major hindrance that stops us from finding a deeper joy in life is our desperate efforts to hang on to our superficial happiness that money and success can give us. There is a secularised form of justification by deeds in our contemporary stress, and anxiety about achievements that St John of the Cross can help us to diagnose and to handle, whereas Martin Luther can primarily help us to criticise it.

### **Summary**

I am interested in the spirituality of the Carmelites because I believe that it can help us who stand in the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition to develop our doctrine in a way that will make it easier for us to interact with contemporary people who are longing for or interested in spirituality. Such a development can help us and other people to grow in the context of the church and to mature in our Christian faith. I have highlighted three examples of opportunities for doctrinal development

that the Carmelites open to us. I have treated the first example more extensively by elaborating on how St Thérèse of the Child Jesus can help us to develop our understanding of the relationship between grace and asceticism. She illustrates that the idea of the primacy of grace can be united with an asceticism that is worth encouraging. The other two examples I have treated more summarily by suggesting that St Teresa of Avila can help us to develop a Christology that is based in creation theology, while St John of the Cross can throw new light on our theology of the cross. All these three examples illustrate what receptive ecumenism can mean. Hopefully, these examples can encourage further studies on how Carmelite spirituality and the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition can enrich each other and thereby contribute to the church's mission in today's world.

## TWO-AND-A-HALF CHEERS FOR ‘RECEPTIVE’ ECUMENISM

**Charlie Annis CR\***

*Receptive ecumenism can justly lay claim to be the dominant model of ecumenism in the Church today. The ‘receptive’ conception of the ecumenical encounter has, however, often been conceived in predominantly negative terms (encounter with another Christian tradition exposes what is lacking in my own). Drawing upon the experience of ecumenical encounter between two religious communities (one Anglican, one Roman Catholic), this article argues that a wider and more positive application of receptive ecumenism is required if it is to find its proper place in the Church today.*

‘They are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.’ (Jas. 1:23-24)

One of the most interesting things about seeing someone you have not seen for a long time is how quickly you pick up on even the smallest changes in their appearance, even if the person in question is oblivious to them. The classic example of this is the way grandparents always notice how much their grandchildren have grown when the children themselves, and possibly even their parents, may not have noticed any change at all. Or when someone comes back from a holiday in the sun, it is always immediately apparent to us if they have picked up a tan, even if they have no idea of it themselves. And yes, alas, we cannot help but notice if that old school friend of ours has put on weight since the last time we saw them.

Of course, there is no great mystery about any of this, it is simply that the kind of change I am talking about is change that takes place very slowly, and so those who witness only the contrast between how a person looked before and how they look now have a certain advantage

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over those who have kept on looking at themselves throughout this gradual process of change. This very ordinary and readily verifiable observation is one of a number of similarly ordinary observations that underlie an age-old paradox about self-perception: that the more we look at ourselves the less we are able to see; the more we look, the less we perceive.

The paradoxes of self-perception are naturally of great interest to those actively engaged in the work of ecumenism. Whilst it may at one time have been possible to engage in ecumenical dialogue with the expectation, even the determination, that the self-perception of the participants would remain unchanged—ecumenism as a kind of wildlife safari—it is today generally taken for granted that a better understanding of one's own tradition is one of the great fruits of the ecumenical encounter. Indeed, a growing recognition of this truth is one of the factors that has led to the rise of so-called 'receptive' ecumenism in the Church today, the great mantra of which is to ask not 'what is there in my own tradition from which others stand to gain?' but 'what is there in traditions other than my own from which I stand to gain?'. The singular advantage of this 'receptive' approach lies in its refusal to treat the riches of other Christian traditions as the curiosities of an alien culture, but to recognise instead the possibility that such riches may expose deficiencies or impoverishments in one's own tradition. In other words, the receptive ecumenist recognises that the ecumenical encounter is as liable to bring about a shift in self-perception as in the perception of others.

I wonder, however, whether this largely negative understanding of the fruit of the ecumenical encounter (contact with other Christian traditions exposes what is lacking in my own) acknowledges the extent to which a given tradition depends upon its encounter with others not only to recognise its deficiencies, but to arrive at a halfway accurate understanding of its riches. The basic assumption underlying the practice of receptive ecumenism appears to be that the great barrier to a Christian tradition entering into fruitful ecumenical relationship with another is an excessive preoccupation with its own riches. What this assumption fails to acknowledge, however, is the extent to which a given tradition depends upon its encounter with another even to recognise its own riches in the first place.

By way of illustration of the above I might offer the example of my own community. The Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, is a

community of men living the monastic life in the Benedictine tradition within the Church of England. The community was founded in 1892 by Charles Gore as part of the revival of religious life in the Church of England that issued from the Oxford Movement, a movement to recover the Catholic heritage of the Church of England pioneered by St John Henry Newman, Edward Bouverie Pusey and John Keble among others. In common with many of the communities which emerged from this revival, despite bequeathing to the community a strongly monastic ethos, Gore and the other founding brethren were wary of identifying themselves with any of the established monastic or mendicant orders, opting rather to pursue a mixed life which would allow them the flexibility to respond to the needs of the Church in a variety of settings and contexts. In practice this meant that from its earliest days the community was engaged in a very wide variety of activities, from missionary work both in the UK and abroad, to the founding of schools and seminaries and supplying teachers for both, to offering hospitality to a variety of guests and retreatants, all of which was grounded in the daily round of prayer and community life in each of the community's houses.

For all the very real commitment of the community's founders to be at the service of the Church and to provide whatever it was the Church needed most at a given moment, it cannot be denied that the founders' wariness of identifying themselves with any existing order was in part due to the poverty of the ecumenical environment in which they found themselves. Despite the notable successes of the Oxford Movement, there remained a high level of suspicion in the Church of the England of anything that looked like a move towards the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, and few things could look more like a move towards the practice of the Roman Catholic Church than the founding of a monastery (hence Gore's famous riposte to the enquirer who asked what the first brothers were doing in the small village outside of Oxford where Gore was vicar: 'Learning to ride a bicycle').

The lamentably hostile ecumenical environment in the Church of England of Gore's day was one of the reasons the community was from the beginning deeply committed to the work of ecumenism. Gore and Walter Frere (the community's second superior) were members of the so-called 'Malines Conversations' between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the 1920s as well as of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius (the principal Anglican-Orthodox ecumenical society) and a

variety of ecumenical encounters quickly became a staple feature of the community's life. However it was not until after the Second Vatican Council that the community's most significant ecumenical relationship began to take shape.

From the late 1960s onwards a friendship began to emerge between the Community of the Resurrection and the Roman Catholic Benedictine community of the Abbey of St Matthias in Trier, Germany. This climaxed in the early 1980s when the two communities entered into a formal partnership with one another, a partnership which was renewed in the mid-nineties and which continues to this day. Over the more than fifty years of fellowship this relationship now represents there have been many visits and exchanges between the two communities, and both communities readily testify to the amount that each has learned from the other. What is particularly striking in listening to the reminiscences of brothers from both communities, however, is how often these concern what the relationship has taught them not about the other community but about themselves. In the case of the community in Mirfield, it was only when we began to listen to the brothers from Trier reflecting on our community that we began to recognise how deeply Benedictine our life really is. This much more explicit recognition of the community's Benedictine identity has in turn been one of the most important developments in our life in recent years. In other words, it was not until we were shown it by others, others whose difference of ecclesial belonging was acknowledged from the outset, that the community in Mirfield came to a proper understanding of the riches it already possessed. And it was only when these riches were recognised that the way was made clear for a deeper and richer sense of belonging within the wider tradition of Benedictine monasticism.

The above has been the privileged experience of my community over the past fifty years, but in hindsight no such experience is really necessary to see the sense of its most basic lesson. If my aim is to discover what is distinctive about Anglicanism or Anglican religious life, then the last person I would go to looking for the answer is an Anglican. Far better to ask a Roman Catholic or an Orthodox or a Lutheran, who by virtue of their distinctive vantage point would instantly be able to recognise the host of subtle ways in which Anglicanism differs from the 'norm' of their own tradition.

The fault in the receptive ecumenical calculus, then, lies in the assumption (albeit tacit) that the riches of any Christian tradition can be perceived in isolation, by introspection alone, prior to the encounter with others and with difference; when in reality it is only through an encounter of this sort that anything like this kind of self-knowledge can be arrived at.

And once we see this, the potential liabilities of the receptive ecumenical approach begin to show themselves. If the ecumenical encounter shows me simply what is lacking in my own tradition, then I am free to choose whether or not I wish to confront this potentially difficult truth about myself. As long as I can remain happily ensconced in the riches of my own tradition without the assistance of any other then the ecumenical encounter inevitably comes to seem something of merely cosmetic importance. The great liability of conceiving of ecumenism in this way is that it tends to entrench a view of ecumenism as an 'optional extra' for those with the time or inclination to pursue it, an activity for 'enthusiasts'. In this way, the entire ecumenical enterprise is thrown into jeopardy by the simple fact that most of us do not especially relish confronting our deficiencies, even through the medium of another tradition's riches. If, on the other hand, it is only through an encounter with others that I can know myself at all—both the bad and the good, deficiencies and riches—then the choice for or against the ecumenical encounter is a far starker one: it is a choice between confronting the truth about myself and subsisting on a hazy collection of half-truths and untested intuitions.

The implications of this insight are not, however, confined to their significance for the self-understanding of a single tradition. Such an account of the dynamics of receptive ecumenism has ramifications for any consideration of the ultimate goal of the ecumenical project. If it is true that a tradition cannot come to a proper understanding of itself not just without the help of others but without the help of those who are different from them, then an ecumenical vision which has for its ultimate goal a narrow uniformity is ruled out from the beginning. A unified Church that excludes variety and difference, and even a degree of separation, must necessarily be a Church that has forfeited the possibility of a robust self-understanding.

So, two-and-a-half cheers for receptive ecumenism. The cheers, however, are meant quite sincerely. What I have offered here is not a critique of receptive ecumenism per se, but merely of the limited way



in which it has sometimes been conceived. There is nothing in the theory of receptive ecumenism itself that prevents it from accommodating such a critique. What I have argued for is merely a widening of its scope, a widening which puts the ecumenical encounter in its proper place not as an optional extra for those who happen to be interested in that sort of thing, but as a necessary work of self-understanding for the whole Church.

## THE BACKGROUND, IMPACT AND LEGACY OF *BAPTISM, EUCHARIST AND MINISTRY*<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Pierce \*

*In 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches produced its first convergence text, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry or BEM. Forty years after this text was agreed, this paper reflects on the ecumenical impact and legacy of BEM. Locating BEM within the project of modern ecumenism, the paper notes the consistent concern with these sacramental themes within the Faith and Order Movement, and highlights the important role played by ecumenical reflection on the nature and exercise of episcopé in reaching ecclesio-logically significant convergence.*

In a mildly acerbic overview of scholarly writings in the field of church history, the distinguished Methodist scholar John Kent dubbed ecumenism ‘the light that failed’<sup>2</sup>. This somewhat discouraging verdict came in 1987—BEM was then only five years old, and deliberated responses from the churches were still arriving in Geneva. In due course, six volumes of responses would be published.<sup>3</sup> Another contemporary ecumenical milestone—the *Final Report* of ARCIC (later

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was the opening address at the 2022 joint conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain and the Irish Theological Association at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth. The conference theme reflected the fortieth anniversary of the landmark ecumenical convergence text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, or BEM.

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<sup>2</sup> John Kent, *The Unacceptable Face: The Modern Church in Eyes of the Historian* (London: SCM Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches 1982); Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Text*, 6 vols (Geneva: WCC, 1986–88).

rebranded as the final report of ARCIC I) had addressed cognate themes in a bilateral context, and was in the process of being received by Anglicans and Roman Catholics.<sup>4</sup> But, even if the ecumenical ‘light’ can hardly be said to have failed altogether by the late 1980s, Kent had undoubtedly grasped something of the challenge that it was facing, and, indeed, that it may have actively elicited. This was, famously, a time when an ailing Karl Rahner noted that ‘in general, we are living through a wintry season’; although he added—and this is less frequently quoted (unless one is sympathetic to liberative praxis)—that there is also evidence in the church of a ‘very animated charismatic life, one that yields hope.’<sup>5</sup>

### **Ad fontes**

The origins of BEM coincided with those of the modern ecumenical movement at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries. Baron Friedrich von Hügel, an informed observer of matters philosophical and ecclesiological, was one of a number of contemporary writers who noted how—in the West at any rate—religious faultlines were increasingly running as much within, as between, the churches. Von Hügel’s friend, the Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch, spoke similarly of the rise of a ‘critical’ account of Christian origins, by which he meant increasingly-available and increasingly-accepted scholarly accounts of Christianity and its histories, that resisted narrations shaped and limited by defensive ecclesial self-interest.

Stormy weather lay ahead: ecumenism emerged in tandem with an ascendant Catholic integralism which invented and pursued the ‘deviant insiders’ that it called modernists, and also alongside a Protestant fundamentalism—particularly in the United States of America—that defined itself against liberalism and evolutionism. Such integralist and fundamentalist religious visions as these continue to attract followers; yet in those same years an ecumenical alternative had found its voice and had found ways in which to commend itself more widely. Within a generation, the French Protestant Oscar Cullman was writing in positive terms about such previously un-Protestant topics as

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<sup>4</sup> Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Final Report* (London: CTS/SPCK, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds, *Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of his Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 39.

tradition and the role of Peter in the church at Rome, and he would in due course play an important role at Vatican II.

In addition to specifically scholarly developments, the nascent ecumenical movement also drew from the experience of nineteenth century Protestant missionaries. Seeking converts was relatively new to Protestant churches whose theological attachment to doctrines of predestination had only recently faced significant challenge from John Wesley and others. Here in Ireland, Wesley's insight yielded an ambiguous ecumenical outcome: Irish Catholics were now recognised by Irish Protestants as being at least potentially Christians, but that same insight fuelled sectarian tensions in the Bible War and Second Reformation. No longer dismissed as unsalvageable goats, inter-denominational sheep stealing—for explicitly religious reasons—became A Thing.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere, there are two striking features of this missionary experience to note. The first is the extraordinary degree of urgency attached to securing individual conversions. One of the key figures in this regard was—for a while—a clergyman of the Church of Ireland, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Like many of his contemporaries, Darby was concerned with the philosophy of history. His own account of where history has been and of where it is going—dispensationalism—framed itself in scriptural language as a series of divinely ordained dispensations or ages. According to Darby, we were now reaching the end of the age of the church; soon the thousand year reign of Christ will dawn: The End was thus increasingly nigh. For those who relish syllables, Darby's position is known as pre-millennial dispensationalism—history has entered an unstoppable process of decline: social or political schemes to ameliorate matters are doomed, and, in the face of a rapidly approaching End, evangelical energy must focus on saving individual souls, and nothing else. The urgent piety of pre-millennial dispensationalism wove its way into the imagination of many nineteenth century Protestants, including revivalists, missionaries and student movements. As the twentieth century began, it echoes in Nobel Laureate John Mott's call for 'the evangelization of the world in this generation'.

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<sup>6</sup> Some of this contentious territory is explored by the contributors to Denis Carroll, ed., *Religion in Ireland: Past, Present and Future* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999).

Such urgency as this also relativised Protestant missionary ecclesiology. Inter-denominational missionary societies came into being and became popular—which was not always a source of delight for Protestant and especially Anglican doctrinal purists who preferred to prove Bossuet correct. As a result, interdenominational experience, rather than something to be discouraged if not anathematised, became an important resource within both the missionary and ecumenical movements. Ecclesiologically, the experience of mission had led to a renegotiation of sacred and traditional boundaries. *Koinonia*, once again, was finding liminality congenial.

The second aspect to note in this distinctive missionary experience is its increasingly self-critical self-understanding. The ‘start’ of the modern ecumenical movement is often dated to the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910. One of the principal organisers of the conference was Joseph Oldham, who had studied under Europe’s first Professor of Missiology, Gustav Warneck (1834–1910) at the University of Halle. Warneck’s approach to mission began with an explicitly contextual question—Christ tells his disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19): how then should we interpret different ‘nations’? And what does it require for such ‘nations’ to be discipled? Later interpreters may be forgiven their caution in responding to Warneck’s concern with itemising national characteristics, but this approach marked an important alternative to simply securing individual conversions regardless of the convert’s *sitz im leben*. If ecumenical origins were marked by *koinonia* going walkabout beyond the boundaries of its usual European habitations, so too the missiological roots of ecumenical experience brought an awareness of contextual diversity as a theological challenge and resource.

In the hands of Joseph Oldham, attention to context became a hallmark of the 1910 conference. The preparatory conference papers stretched to nine volumes, and represent Oldham’s attempt to undertake an in-depth religious audit of the contemporary world. There were efforts to gather insights from beyond the usual suspects amongst Protestant and Anglican missionaries. Later readers are sharply conscious of the extent to which the authors failed to curb cultural self-interest in their depiction of their world. Nevertheless, these volumes show that remarkable strides had been taken towards a more contextually sensitive account of the challenges facing Christian missionary activity, and their note of self-criticism proved prophetic—

how, the Edinburgh Conference asked, can Christianity be commended to anyone, given how its profession of unity is combined with lively traditions of internecine conflict?

That was the question addressed by both the Life and Work, and the Faith and Order movements in the immediate aftermath of World War I, with the former emphasising the importance of churches working together to promote unity (nicely expressed in the pragmatic dictum, 'service unites, doctrine divides'), and the latter concerned with an explicitly doctrinal and ecclesiological grounding of ecclesial unity. Contemporary reports from these bodies indicate the extent to which the ecumenical movement had secured support from churches—and from theologians—amongst Orthodox and Protestants, culminating in the proposal to convene a World Council of Churches, the first meeting of which took place in Amsterdam after World War II. And, as the ecumenical movement developed institutional forms alongside existing church structures, it also began to articulate an explicitly theological agenda in support of church unity. Central to this agenda was the search for agreement, from 1927 onwards, on the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and for mutual recognition of the ministries exercised within the churches.

This ecumenical survey *ad fontes* underscores three features. The first, most obviously, is the fundamental significance of baptism, eucharist and ministry as ecumenical themes (both individually and as a troika) for the divided churches in their efforts to overcome barriers to visible unity; this was recognised from the very start. These are sacramental landmarks in the life of the Church (capital C), with important relativising consequences for the lives of the churches (small c). But, in a context where the Church is concealed in the life of divided denominations—with each part claiming to be (or implying by its continuing separation that it is) more whole than the others—such means of grace as these have developed more narrowly self-interested and domesticated functions in the policing of other, less ultimate, borders of belonging.

The second feature, no less obviously, is the extent to which an age of ecumenism both coincides with and presupposes an age of anti-ecumenism. Ecumenism, it has been wisely claimed, often begins where Christian disunity is recognised as a cause of pain, and where steps are taken to address the causes and results of such pain. In this survey, ecumenism begins as an attempt to rethink and reorientate the

missionary project that had energised nineteenth-century Protestantism. Looking back to the time of ecumenical origins from a vantage point in the early 1960s, John Mackay—the first person to hold a chair in Ecumenics, at Princeton Theological Seminary in the USA—observed that the end of the nineteenth century had witnessed the emergence of Christianity as a genuinely global phenomenon. Western Christianity had moved beyond Europe and the Americas; the churches of the East had moved West—the ‘original’ copyright and prevailing state of play in previous centuries was unlikely to remain unchallenged.

This new situation of ‘world Christianities’ (rather than Christianity in the singular facing ‘world religions’ in the plural) required nothing less than a new way of doing theology. Mackay’s university had followed German missiologists in adopting the term ‘ecumenics’ to convey a sense of new responsibilities facing an already complex academic discipline. As a ‘science of the church universal’, Mackay’s understanding of ecumenics augmented traditional theological sub-disciplines (the territory of the Faith and Order movement) in disciplined interaction with what he called the ‘kindred sciences’ of sociology, ecclesiology, church history, history of missions, comparative religion, and geo-politics. Part of Mackay’s concern clearly echoes the early missiological attention to social and cultural analysis, as pioneered by Warneck. Mackay’s inclusion of both sociology and geo-politics highlights his sensitivity to understanding that the exercise and understanding of power is a constitutive feature of all intercultural engagements, including those within and between religious bodies. That Christianity had secured a global role relied on a coincidence of missionary expansion and European colonialism; these circumstances remain a live source of energetic concern within Christian ecumenical life and thought. Indeed, a persuasive case has been put by a number of recent scholars—for example, Werner Ustorf—that one way in which to read the emergence of the Christian ecumenical movement, together with a growing interest in World Christianities and intercultural theologies, is as a repentant turn on the part of a Eurocentric theological project that is taking serious trouble with the legacies and present realities of its hermeneutical horizons.

This second feature has already begun to morph into a third. One of the most ecumenically unsettling books from the early years of the Faith and Order Movement was written by H. Richard Niebuhr, reflecting the social context of the USA in the late 1920s. In *The Social*

*Sources of Denominationalism* Niebuhr drew attention to a strange cognitive dissonance in how churches related theology and context.<sup>7</sup> Ask the churches to account for their identity, and the reasons why they don't agree with other churches, observed Niebuhr, and they will answer in doctrinal terms—they will speak of the importance of or danger posed by bishops; they will enthuse or dismiss the papacy; they will grow competitive over the correct number of sacraments; and such terms as apostolicity, justification, election, covenant—and many, many more besides—will be omnipresent. But look again, says Niebuhr, at the remarkable overlap of religious identity with what the churches tend not to acknowledge in terms of both ethnicity and class.

The impact of Niebuhr's work is evident in a great deal of ecumenical documentation from the 1930s onwards, particularly in its sensitivity towards what were at first referred to as 'non-theological' factors in religious identity, but which rapidly—and wisely—became known as 'non-doctrinal factors'. As a result, a certain yet undoubtedly valuable loss of political naivete accompanied early ecumenical discussions of baptism, eucharist and ministry. Contemporary developments underlined the subversive potentialities of the new life and community 'in Christ' that the sacraments presented; whilst at the same time providing a critical standpoint when these potentialities risked cultural and political misappropriation. Key voices in the ecumenical movement at this time included Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; their concerns with ecumenicity underscored their interpretation of the significance of the conflict in Germany between the Confessing Church and the church sponsored by the Nazi state.

### **And so to Accra**

Within the ecumenical movement, the specifically doctrinal or theological aspects of the quest for unity fall within the purview of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches or WCC. Initially a movement in its own right, Faith and Order combined in 1948 with the Life and Work Movement—and after 1961, with the International Missionary Council—to form the WCC.

From its inception, Faith and Order has been conscious that not everyone means the same thing when they speak of unity—is it, for

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<sup>7</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 1929 (New York and Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957).



instance something to be received? Or achieved? Or restored? Or discovered? Or anticipated? One of the basic pieces of ecumenical theological kit is a grasp of the various 'models' of unity. Five principal models of unity are widely acknowledged: organic unity, federation or federal unity, conciliar fellowship, unity in reconciled diversity, and communion of communions. Of these, some find favour for reasons that are confessional in nature: the model of organic unity is something that appeals strongly to Orthodox, Anglicans and Roman Catholics; whereas the model of unity as reconciled diversity retains a large Lutheran fan base. Some models seem to increase or decrease in popularity as times change—organic unity was the first model to receive sustained attention (in much early documentation it is evidently presupposed as simply being what unity means), but increasingly a model of the church as a communion of communions has dominated ecumenical conversations.<sup>8</sup>

The Faith and Order Commission itself is a group of 120 theologians from across the globe, all of whom are appointed by the WCC Assembly or by the WCC's Central Committee. It represents an extraordinarily rich gathering of theologians from different traditions, ranging from Orthodoxy to Pentecostalism. After the Roman Catholic Church embraced the ecumenical movement at Vatican II, twelve Roman Catholic theologians became Faith and Order Commissioners, with important consequences on the road to BEM.

BEM is not a long text. Yet its claim to represent ecumenical convergence is a big claim. One way in which to gain a sense of what the claim entails is to approach BEM *via* its precursor, the Faith and Order document, *One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognised Ministry*, which had been finalised at Accra in 1974, after which the text was circulated to the churches for comment.<sup>9</sup> The Accra text provides an excellent example of the ecumenical theological imagination musing aloud. Part of its job is the gathering together of insights from other multilateral and bilateral dialogue processes that had been taking place—with active support from Faith and Order—over the course of half a century. Building on this material, the Accra

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<sup>8</sup> On the paradoxical plurality of 'unity' see Harding Meyer, *That All May Be One: Perceptions and models of Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> *One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognised Ministry: Three Agreed Statements*, Faith and Order Paper No. 73 (Geneva: WCC, 1975).

text further articulated how the churches now understand some of the traditionally neuralgic issues in their ecclesiological self-understandings. For instance, a distinguishing feature of the Accra text is its focus on apostolicity, and on the ways in which historically-embedded disputes over this topic might now be re-framed. Hermeneutical restrictions imposed by centuries of ecclesial conflict had led to an impoverishing contrast between theologies of apostolicity that focused on the importance of continuity of ministerial office on the one hand, and those that focused on continuity of faith on the other. Neither is entirely misguided, yet—according to Accra—these are properly matters of emphasis in a more comprehensive theology of apostolicity: the primary reference of apostolicity is to the church in the totality of its existence. Then, in a constructive move, the text re-connected its theology of apostolicity with the tradition of a threefold ministry within the Church, and imagined how such a ministry might be both received and recognised in an act of ecumenical discipleship. Here the emphasis was not on quantitatively increasing apostolicity—as it were—amongst churches that have not retained the threefold ministry, but rather on enabling the churches together to affirm their participation in the Church's apostolicity.

Whilst the Accra text was illuminating in its account of the apostolicity of the whole church (and pregnant with consequences for subsequent treatments of baptism, eucharist and ministry), not all churches found its approach congenial. Reactions to the text indicated that something had come unstuck in balancing valid ecclesial concerns—Protestant churches in the West, for the most part, liked Accra; Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches registered their unease at the less than explicitly intrinsic connection envisaged by Accra between continuity of church structures and the apostolic nature of the Church. And here questions arose about not only the ministry *of* the Church, but *to* the church: in what ways did patterns of ordained ministry within the Church serve its apostolic mission; and in what ways did the nature of the ordained ministry connect with the nature of the apostolic Church?

### **From Accra to BEM**

In many respects, the theological heavy lifting leading from Accra to BEM is to be located in an important Faith and Order memorandum, *Episkopé and Episcopate in Ecumenical Perspective*, itself the product of

an ecumenical consultation.<sup>10</sup> The constituent elements of the consultation are illuminating. As well as having Roman Catholic and Orthodox scholars outline an agreed narrative of biblical and apostolic developments (R.E. Brown and J.D. Zizioulas), the document includes contemporary experiences of episcopal ministries of oversight strengthening the visibility of the church's unity (in Tanzania, M. Mbwana and South India, N.D. Rao Samuel) and its prophetic ministry (in South America, S. Escobar).

The text acknowledges that all churches presuppose the exercise of oversight or *episkopé*, though not all churches name their practices of oversight in the same way. It introduces an important distinction between three different ways in which such oversight is exercised—personal, communal, and collegial—and pointedly observes that imbalance amongst these modes of oversight is at the heart of theological and ecclesiological divergence over understandings of ministry to the churches. That is a point meriting more extensive ecumenical attention.

Brother Max Thurian of Taizé chaired the committee charged with preparing the post-Accra text of *BEM*. By way of addressing some of the weaknesses identified in the Accra text, *Episkopé and Episcopate in Ecumenical Perspective* posed seven questions—couched descriptively—and provided rather more prescriptive answers: 'What is the relation of the episcopal ministry to the Church founded by Christ? What is the relation of apostles to bishops and in what sense are bishops in apostolic succession? How is *episkopé* to be exercised in the Church? What is the relationship between bishops in the local church and bishops exercising *episkopé* over several local churches? What are the functions of the bishop in exercising *episkopé* over several churches? How can the past help us to shape the kind of *episkopé* we need today? How can mutual recognition among the churches be achieved?' Time and places change, and with them so too does *episkopé*.

When, therefore, the Faith and Order Commission met in Plenary Session in January 1982 in Lima, it had digested and incorporated these thoughts on oversight and ministry, and was in a position to commend a significantly revised text—*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*—to the churches. This text was presented as a convergence text, a gathering

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<sup>10</sup> *Episkopé and Episcopate in Ecumenical Perspective*, Faith and Order Paper No. 102 (Geneva: WCC, 1980).

together of agreement, and was the first such text since the Faith and Order movement began in 1927. The text did not claim to represent a consensus, though obviously the Commission hoped that BEM would be an important step in that direction.

Introducing the text, William Lazareth and Nikos Nissiotis explained how Faith and Order interpreted this project:

In leaving behind the hostilities of the past, the churches have begun to discover many promising convergences in their shared convictions and perspectives. These convergences give assurance that despite much diversity in theological expression the churches have much in common in their understanding of the faith. The resultant text aims to become part of a faithful and sufficient reflection of the common Christian Tradition on essential elements of Christian communion. In the process of growing together in mutual trust, the churches must develop these doctrinal convergences step by step, until they are able to declare that they are living in communion with one another in continuity with the apostles and the teachings of the universal Church.<sup>11</sup>

John Mott had hoped for the evangelisation of the world in this generation; as the ecumenical movement has developed from Mott's project, it has increasingly adopted the language of pilgrimage to describe how the churches are learning to grow together. In reaching the *telos* of the ecumenical project we may, like Captain Oates, be some time.

One of the features of the convergence on BEM is its methodological discontinuity. Early Faith and Order meetings followed what has been called a comparative method—on a particular theme, a spokesperson for specific churches would outline how their tradition understood the doctrine in question. And, prior to Vatican II, someone from within Faith and Order was tasked to present the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church to ensure that an appropriate breadth of experience entered the deliberations. Over time, however, the introductory function of the comparative method exhausted its purpose, and Faith and Order meetings became more thematically coherent, with confessional fault lines becoming less evident.

To test the claimed convergence, Faith and Order engaged in a wide-ranging process of reception. Important homework was set for the churches:

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<sup>11</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, ix.

The Faith and Order Commission now respectfully invites all churches to prepare an official response to this text at the highest appropriate level of authority, whether it be a council, synod, conference, assembly or other body. In support of this process of reception, the Commission would be pleased to know as precisely as possible:

*The extent to which your church can recognise in this text the faith of the Church throughout the ages;*

*The consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognise the text as an expression of the apostolic faith;*

*The guidance your church can take from this text for its worship, educational, ethical, and spiritual life and witness;*

*The suggestions your church can make for the ongoing work of Faith and Order as it relates the material of this text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to its long-range research project 'Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today'.<sup>12</sup>*

## Conclusion

How do we appraise the significance of BEM? In a collection of essays marking BEM's twenty-fifth anniversary, Mark Heim observed that 'After many decades of comparing the theologies of the churches, BEM marked a dramatic turn. Rather than formulating and reformulating statements on the nature of the unity we seek, BEM sought to exhibit it.'<sup>13</sup> And this demonstration has proven widely useful in various schemes for mutual recognition amongst hitherto divided churches. Two obvious examples spring to mind in our context.

The first is the relationships developed between Nordic and Baltic Lutherans on the one hand, and British, Irish, Portuguese and Spanish Anglicans on the other in the Porvoo Agreement in 1992 which has brought into being the Porvoo Communion of Churches. Here, there was a neuralgic issue over episcopal succession; the language of BEM was helpfully deployed in receiving the episcopal ministry and in ensuring (along with some further important refinements in the important Anglican-Lutheran statement at Niagara in 1987, which had

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>13</sup> S. Mark Heim, 'Baptism and Christian Initiation in Ecclesiological Perspective,' in Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzelidze, eds, *BEM at 25: Critical Insights into a Continuing Legacy*, Faith and Order Paper No. 205 (Geneva: WCC, 2007), 13-28; 14.

reflected further on *episcopé* and episcopate) that habitual differences could be reframed, and relationships significantly altered.<sup>14</sup>

The second is the Covenant signed between Irish Methodists and Irish Anglicans in 2002. Here the unpacking of *episcopé* and episcopate proved decisive. Anglicans were able to see that *episcopé* in the Methodist Church in Ireland is exercised by its annual meeting—where presbyteral ordination occurs—but that this ministry of oversight may be exercised personally by the Methodist President during her/his term of office, and that something of this ministry is retained when their term of office comes to an end, since former Presidents may find themselves summoned to exercise a ministry of *episcopé*. This relationship is an important one, and the presence of Methodist Presidents at episcopal ordinations in the Church of Ireland, and of a Church of Ireland bishop at Methodist ordinations signals that it is possible to recognise something in another tradition that may prove less alien on closer inspection.<sup>15</sup>

The reception of BEM remains an integral part of an important work in progress, as churches seek to make visible a unity they have received, by learning to recognise and receive a diversity of ecclesial experience that echoes deeply in the Church's past and present. BEM's legacy reaches beyond its important impact in the sacramental worship of the churches. In receiving BEM, ecumenical ecclesiology has been significantly energised across the churches, and in 2013 Faith and Order issued its second convergence document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.<sup>16</sup> And the influence of BEM itself continues to be felt. It has become a classic text of the modern ecumenical movement, and as such, it bears repeated reading. It still has something to say to the churches about their vision of the Church.

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<sup>14</sup> See Ola Tjørhom, Ed., *Apostolicity and Unity: Essays on the Porvoo Common Statement*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge U.K.: William B. Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC, 2002), especially 146–200.

<sup>15</sup> For a brief account of the Irish experience see Peter Thompson, *The Journey So Far: Working Out the Covenant* (Dublin: Church of Ireland Publishing, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

## THE PROMISE OF THE WORLD TO COME AND CREATION. ECOLOGICAL CRISES AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

**Peter Scherle**\*

*The article focusses on the difference between two types of correlating present day ecological crises and Christian theology: one that may be called eco-centric with a panentheistic focus, the other theo-centric with a focus on the concept of 'creatio ex nihilo'. Following the second perspective, creation, then, is not a commodity but utterly dependent on God's ongoing creative speech-act. Creation, in effect, is an eschatological and soteriological category that is grounded biblically in the post-exilic hope for a new creation. As a promise, it is a critique of all utopic and dystopic claims in human history. Two consequences of this creation theology are outlined. First, it implies a realistic concept of the political that allows for conflicting aims and that challenges the concept of dominion. And second, it implies a realistic approach to 'nature' that defines the ethical concern as 'habitability'. This results in a fundamental challenge: Christians live in a disenchanted world while waiting for the world to come. This tension is enacted in the Eucharist.*

Present day theology feels challenged by the ecological crises humanity has triggered, from the extinction of species to the global warming that in 2023 already reached 1.5 degrees celsius above the average pre-industrial era. The challenge to theology lies especially in those analyses of the ecological crises that see the root causes not only in the process of industrialisation since the end of the eighteenth century or years of uninhibited economic growth after 1945. More challenging are claims that the root cause of potential ecological disaster lies in the post-enlightenment disenchantment of the world we live in, which itself

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should be seen as the secular expression of a 'dominion theology'<sup>1</sup>, that has been shaped in Western Christianity. Lynn White's influential article from 1967 still informs this perception.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the understanding of nature that has shaped the Western theological approach since the late Middle Ages came under fire. Eco-theologies now struggled with the objectified perspective of the Cartesian world-view and the Kantian epistemology that had been prepared by the nominalist rationalization (and digitalization) of the 'book of nature', as well as by the establishment of a 'virtual reality' on canvas (and screens) by the invention of the central perspective in early Renaissance painting. Theology now no longer emphasised the transcendence but the world-immanence of God as, for example, Jürgen Moltmann in his path-breaking book *God in Creation* (1985).<sup>3</sup>

As a result of this claim a constantly growing body of eco-theological reflection has emerged that tries to revise Christian theology in all its aspects.<sup>4</sup> In this endeavour it is possible to differentiate between two major approaches. They are determined by the way in which they correlate the terms 'eco' and 'theology'. One line of thought focusses on the ecosphere and seems to propose its re-enchantment in applying panentheistic dogmatic reflections. The other line of thought focusses on creation theology and the need to hold on to the concept of 'creatio

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tyson, *Theology and Climate Change* (Abingdon / New York: Routledge, 2021) calls it 'Progressive Dominion Theology'.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,' *Science*, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (10 March 1967), 1203–1207.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 2013; first published in German 1985, then by Fortress Press in English 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Here is a selection of recent publications: Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology: Theology for a Fragile Earth* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2017); Klara A. Jorgenson, Alan G. Padgett (eds), *Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation* (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William Eerdmanns Publishing, 2020); Dermot A. Lane, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue: The Wisdom of 'Laudato Si'* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020); Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).



ex nihilo' which in effect will allow for realistic concepts of 'nature' and 'the political'.<sup>5</sup>

### **Eco-Theology and Panentheism**

The dominant eco-centric strand of reflection struggles with the anthropocentrism of Western creation theology and wants to establish a new understanding of the 'oikologia' that overcomes the antithetical distinctions that have shaped our understanding of 'nature'. Instead of taking for granted the perspective of the isolated 'ego' and its identification with the social position of white, male, rich men (who are considered not to be part of 'nature'), eco-centric theologians try to sketch what a 'web of life' would look like that is not power-ridden nor suffering through exploitation. Thus, a new reading of the so-called Noachide covenant is possible, by which we realise that God's covenant is a covenant with all creation (Genesis 9:9) since God recognises that human wrath and destructiveness will not disappear.

In effect these eco-theologies may emphasise just one perspective, be it feminist or post-colonial,<sup>6</sup> emphasising either eco-justice, earth stewardship or a new spirituality of nature.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, their aim is 'intersectional': they may hold all possible damages to life on earth in view and work together in solidarity. Pope Francis, with a similar intention in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, speaks of 'integral theology'.<sup>8</sup>

Such eco-centric approaches try to understand 'nature' as overcoming the epistemological and ontological dualisms of nature and culture, subject and object, as well as materiality and discourse.<sup>9</sup> This includes insights from the natural sciences about the 'symbiotic planet', with

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<sup>5</sup> The following reflections have been developed in: Peter Scherle, 'Creation as Promise: A Dogmatic Approach to Eco-Theology in the Anthropocene,' *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 103 Issue 1104 (2022), 243–258.

<sup>6</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Hilda P. Koster (eds), *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Sophia Chirongoma, Esther Mombo (eds), *Mother Earth, Postcolonial and Liberation Theologies* (Minneapolis: Lexington Books & Fortress Academic, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace. Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).

<sup>8</sup> See also: Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum: Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis to All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis* (2023).

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014).

human beings as ‘holobiontic’ creatures.<sup>10</sup> Bruno Latour has influenced the imagination with his ‘Actor-Network-Theory’, which considers all organic and inorganic life-forms as ‘actants’.<sup>11</sup> Support for this way of thinking is found in authors like Donna Haraway,<sup>12</sup> Jane Bennet,<sup>13</sup> Karen Barad<sup>14</sup> and others, whose explorations have been called ‘new materialism’.<sup>15</sup>

One of the results of this widening of the perspective, though, can be the diffusion of the ‘anthropos’.<sup>16</sup> The borders between animals and human beings, as well as between human beings and digitalised machines are thus blurred. Meanwhile, post-humanists and transhumanists imagine a world in which the ‘anthropos’ is transformed into ‘hybrids’ of all sorts or replaced by technical objects with artificial intelligence.<sup>17</sup> This trajectory opens up a possibility by which the earth may become uninhabitable for human beings as we know them, but may become suitable for other natures or virtual realities, which may find a new and improved home—and in the case of the transhumanist vision—for an immortal anthropic machine. This, by the way, is surely a new form of anthropocentrism, which leaves behind the limitations of the human body and its entanglement with ‘nature’.

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<sup>10</sup> Lynn Margulis, *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson: 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Rick Dolphijn, Iris van der Tuin (eds), *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* (London & New York: Verso, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simions, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1998).

Dogmatically, we observe here a tendency to come up with a *neo-animist* understanding of the world we live in,<sup>18</sup> which in theological reflection is sometimes called *panentheistic*.<sup>19</sup> Although this approach takes the distinction between the infinite God and finite creation into consideration, its main concern is that God is perceived in an androcentric way as a sovereign power untouched by the sighing and suffering of creation. The incarnation, therefore, is the clue to the doctrine of God and of creation. Elizabeth Johnson speaks of ‘deep incarnation’, ‘deep crucifixion’ and ‘deep resurrection’, in order to break up an androcentric understanding of incarnation.<sup>20</sup> The descending movement of God—becoming not simply human, but a creature among creatures—determines the understanding of the *oikos* earth. As a result, it is, according to Sallie McFague, ‘God’s body’ that we crucify by damaging life on earth.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Catherine Keller has tried to introduce an apophatic perspective that avoids the animistic impasse.<sup>22</sup> But in the end it is difficult to maintain God’s transcendence by just stating it, while the panentheistic matrix shapes the substantial eco-theological reflections.

In this type of eco-theology we can easily detect the traditions of liberation, of feminist and of political theologies that emerged since the 1960s. Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle come to mind, but also Leonardo Boff and Rosemary Radford Ruether,<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup> Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Arthur R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1979); this prominently represents such a naturalist and panentheistic position that it excludes the radical newness of the ‘coming of Christ’, because it knows only an evolutionary ‘being and becoming’.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000); Sally Mc Fague, *A New Climate for Christology: Kenosis, Climate Change and Befriending Nature* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Exemplary is Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994).

emphasis is on the suffering and crucified God as the locus of revelation. And the ethical imperative is to care for the integrity of creation. An unresolved question, though, remains with us: in what way is the suffering God more than a symbol of solidarity? What about salvation that involves those who have become the victims of history? The question can also be modified in view of recent panentheistic eco-theologies: in what way is an animistic understanding of creation of salvific significance? What about the hope for a new heaven and a new earth? And finally: do we really want to say that ecological disaster would be the end of creation?

### **Creation Theology and ‘creatio ex nihilo’**

The other type of eco-theology follows a theo-centric approach. Here traditions like the Anglican Radical Orthodoxy,<sup>24</sup> the French Roman Catholic Ressourcement-Theology,<sup>25</sup> modern Orthodox thinkers in Europe and the US<sup>26</sup> and a renewed Barthian theology (Christian Link, Günter Thomas)<sup>27</sup> seem to work in a similar direction. *The focus here is on the creation out of nothing, ‘creatio ex nihilo’.* Creation is neither intentionally fabricated from some pre-existent materiality, nor is it an outpouring or an emanation of the divine into the material world. Rather, creation is the expression of the dynamic fullness of life by which God becomes revealed as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>24</sup> Related creation theologies are offered by Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018); Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> See the interpretation by Bryan C. Hollon, *Everything is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Eugene OR.: Cascade Books, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Yonkers NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2018); David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Christian Link, *Schöpfung: Ein theologischer Entwurf im Gegenüber von Naturwissenschaft und Ökologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012); Günter Thomas, *Gottes Lebendigkeit: Beiträge zur systematischen Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019); Günter Thomas, *Neue Schöpfung: Systematisch-theologische Untersuchungen zur Hoffnung auf das ‘Leben in der zukünftigen Welt’* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

the triune God: creating, indwelling creation and communicating between God and creation.

Understanding creation as intrinsically tied to God challenges especially the Reformed doctrine of election in two ways. Following Calvin, it had been emphasised that salvation depends solely on God's sovereignty and the act of electing or refusing it (double predestination). The doctrine of election was thus positioned in soteriology, i.e. on the playing field of creation and human history, and seemed to suggest a choice by God in the modern anthropomorphic sense of the word. If creation is God's eternal self-determination to be 'God for us'—as is revealed in the history of Jesus Christ—the old doctrine of election is reconfigured and moved into the doctrine of God. God does not need or will creation. Rather, creation is a finite expression of God's infinite being. The world is not God's body (in a pantheistic sense). Yet the transcendent God can be intimately present to the world, as is expressed in the divine acts of covenanting, to which the biblical narratives bear witness.

This understanding of creation stops short of describing the inner being of God.<sup>28</sup> However, Sarah Coakley—from a Roman Catholic perspective—wants to go further. She speaks of a 'trinitarian *ontology of desire*', qualifying a more general but very popular approach that sees 'relationality' as the ground of the divine being.<sup>29</sup> Both approaches, though, are problematic in that they presuppose a striving force in God (either 'desire' or 'relationality'), which jeopardises the gratuity of God's 'choosing life' out of nothing. Others, like Catherine Keller, want to get rid of the concept of 'election' altogether, because she associates it with Carl Schmitt's concept of sovereignty as decision about the state of emergency. But this despotic understanding of election has nothing to do with the gratuity of God's self-determination in creation, which finds its expression in human history in the 'covenants' of the biblical God. Creation, therefore, may be best understood not as the result of a (despotic) decision, nor of a (longing) desire, but—corresponding to the covenanting of the biblical God—as the free and fully gratuitous self-determining of God.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael T. Dempsey (ed.), *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William Eerdmanns Publishing, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

To start with creation out of nothing also implies that we cannot assign ecological ruptures, violence and death to other godlike forces or to human sinfulness. *Creation itself is disruptive and awaits salvation.* In other words: *violence and death are woven into the web of life.* The Book of Job must be read together with the creation narratives in Genesis in order to avoid a sentimental and romantic understanding of creation. The two answers that Job gets from God, which respond to his questions about his unjustified suffering, clarify that there are two spheres of creation that resist human control. One is the sphere of wild animals—be it wild donkeys or viruses—that constantly threatens cultivated nature with destruction and death. The other sphere is that of Leviathan and Behemoth, those beasts who threaten to push creation back into chaos. Humanity should not try to play with them, but leave that to God, who safeguards and limits them. Both spheres belong to the creation that God has called ‘good’. And the Book of Job, though it tells of a restitution of Job’s life and wealth, fails to answer the question whether the destruction and the people killed around Job, are just some more hapless victims in the process of history and nature that we have to accept. It is the prophet Ezekiel who insists that this would not be acceptable. He sees the divine breath of life as a stormy wind over the killing fields of history that wakes up and renews the dead. Creation, which is filled with death and destruction, is in need of a new creation.

The creation that comes out of nothing is, therefore, not something where we can make a distinction between the original creation—which then would look like a product—and the *creatio continua*. Creation is not a commodity, but utterly dependent on God’s ongoing creative speech-act (for which the Hebrew term *bara* is reserved) that is described in Genesis as God taking a breath and then speaking the Word, through which creation comes into existence. Without the divine fullness of life, to which the *pneuma* and the *logos* belong, creation would fall back into a nothingness that we cannot even imagine, because it has no being in and of itself. And neither do we need to feel threatened by this nothingness, because creation participates in the divine fullness of life that can never be exhausted.

### **The Promise of Creation and The World to come— Dogmatic Revisions**

One dogmatic consequence is the *need for a revisioning of pneumatology*. The Holy Spirit not only revives but is also the giver of life, which

stems from the fullness of life in the triune God. In consequence, we *have to revise the dogmatic topology*, which can no longer be constructed by separate *topoi* that invite the idea of a sequence of divine acts like creation, redemption and consummation, which may even be associated with different divine ‘persons’. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth both sensed that the restrictions of such a ‘systematic’ approach cannot be the last word in a Christian dogmatic. Maybe we need a reset ‘theological grammar’<sup>30</sup> in a way that allows for a plurality of theological languages, grammars and dialects, which can be accessed in various ways. Barth has indicated and to some extent shown in the fragments of the ‘Ethics of Reconciliation’ of his unfinished *Church Dogmatics* (published under the title ‘The Christian Life’),<sup>31</sup> that he would need to begin writing it anew with a strong pneumatological emphasis<sup>32</sup> and taking up the old insight that the order of faith (and way of life) springs from the way we pray liturgically (*lex orandi—lex credenda—lex vivendi*). Maybe we should imagine this as an open and circular movement. But—and this is essential—the dogmatic movement begins with and returns to the zero-point of the creation out of nothing but God (*creatio ex nihilo*), which implies the reliable promise (soteriology) of the new creation (eschatology), and which reveals God as creating (Father), indwelling (Son) and communicating (Holy Spirit) the fullness of life to creation, as well as the sighing of creation for the Trinitarian God.

The above-mentioned revision of election and divine providence has another consequence that is spelled out with great clarity by the orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. If creation is not the playground for a bad-tempered old man with a beard, who elects and condemns according to some impenetrable sovereign will, then *any theology of a double predestination has lost its ground*. Every creature, organic or inorganic, that has existed, exists and will exist, is shielded by the divine fullness of life. How could we assume that any creature

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<sup>30</sup> For this approach see Dietrich Ritschl, *Logic of Theology: A Brief Account of the Relationship Between Basic Concepts in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> Karl Barth, *The Christian Life* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> Andrew K. Gabriel, *Barth’s Doctrine of Creation: Creation, Nature, Jesus, and the Trinity* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

could get lost to a nothingness that has no existence in itself but can be identified only as negated possibility?

Another insight of this theocentric eco-theology is the dogmatic clarification that *creation is itself a soteriological and eschatological category*. Creation is not a saga about the origin of things, in the way natural sciences explore the history of the universe, but about the meaning and the 'telos' of the world. Barth tried to revise the doctrine of creation along those lines when he stated that the covenant must be understood as the inner ground of creation and, in line with Calvin, creation must be seen as the external ground of the covenant. But this thought was still not radical enough as an ongoing, androcentric perspective in his doctrine of creation showed. Given the biblical origins of the 'creation saga' (as Barth called it, in order to differentiate it from 'myth') we must instead say that *the hope for a new creation is the inner ground of creation*. Or, to use the language of Rowan Williams, Christ, the first-born of the new creation, is the 'heart of creation'.

As we know, the creation narratives emerged in the context of the Babylonian exile. The people of God, defeated in history and deprived of the temple in which the name of God resided, began to trust in the divine power to overcome all historical and natural obstacles and bring about a new creation. This hope may have started small but in the end, as we can read in Isaiah or the Book of Revelation, it embraced the whole cosmos. The liturgical celebration of this hope for a new heaven and a new earth, most likely shaped the narratives of creation.

These biblical narratives may use and struggle with other creation narratives known to the authors of the different layers of the first chapters of Genesis, but the intention is clearly to develop what we call 'creatio ex nihilo'. There is nothing that can rationalise the creation imagined as God's breathing and speaking. And it is this creation, brought forth by *ruah* and *dabar*, by *pneuma* and *logos*, by Spirit and Word, that God calls 'good'. A creation that is completed with God taking a deep breath on the Sabbath, so that all creation is fanned by the wind that blows from the renewed creation, of which prophets like Ezekiel and John speak.

*Creation out of nothing therefore is a promise, a theological utopia and a soteriological dogmatic concept*. As such it is profoundly relevant to the way in which we relate to the world we live in and which is endangered as a human habitat. In other words: creation out of nothing has ethical implications. Some of them at least should be sketched.



## **Ethical Implications of ‘creatio ex nihilo’**

This creation theology offers a *critique of all dystopic and utopic claims* that human beings could in one or the other way bring about the end of time. The integrity of creation is not something we can either secure or endanger. Creation is something we can trust in. It is a promise. And it is sustained by God.

In the light of these considerations *it does not make sense to suggest that humanity could secure ‘the integrity of creation’*, as if creation were a commodity that has been handed over to humanity. The reference to the divine commandment in the Garden of Eden to behold and protect the habitat of paradise is misleading. Human life that takes place outside Eden has no such task and must struggle to sustain itself on earth. This human responsibility would be threatened by either postulating a theo-nomic ethic of the social or by claiming (absolute) ethical autonomy for the individual.

## **Creation Theology and a Realistic Concept of the Political**

If we see creation as promise, we can develop a realistic political theology. All we can do is to avoid chaos (by not playing with Leviathan and Behemoth) and to limit the damage to life inflicted by violence, poverty, lack of freedom, destruction of nature and insecurity. *Such an ecological ethic must accept that there are all sorts of conflicts of aims.* The aim of reducing carbon-dioxide may restrict individual freedom and create more poverty. This requires political decisions that may be difficult in democratic societies, which are based on exactly the affluence that has generated the ecological crises that we face. Unfortunately, the UN’s ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ ignore the conflictual nature of those goals and do not tackle the question of affluence. Thereby, the intended ‘ethics of sustainability’ fails to grapple with the real challenges.

To respond to this promise we need a concept of the political that is not tied up with the authoritarian concept of sovereignty that Carl Schmitt proposed. Catherine Keller, unfortunately, interprets creation out of nothing as the exercise of a (white, male, etc.) sovereign, who decides on the exceptional state of emergency. She does not acknowledge the telling debate that the Roman Catholic convert Erik Peterson had with Carl Schmitt in the first half of the twentieth century. Peterson argued that Schmitt used a (mono-)theistic concept for his claim that his understanding of sovereignty was a secularised

theological concept. Peterson instead demonstrated that the Trinitarian theology of the Church Fathers seriously undermines this interpretation of sovereignty as authoritarian exceptionalist decision. Catherine Keller dismisses this possibility and takes a pantheistic stance that deeply resists the creative power of the Word of God, which she understands as ‘absolute decision’.<sup>33</sup> Her process theology, by which creation is like God ‘becoming’<sup>34</sup> and is threatened by the (pre-existent) abyssal chaos, leads to the idea of an ‘ecodivine *intercarnation*’<sup>35</sup> and to a political theology of ‘coalitional intersectionality’<sup>36</sup>. This political theology of radical immanence ends, not accidentally, with a self-asserting question: ‘why not become the new earth, the new public, we imagine?’<sup>37</sup>

That there is no polity sufficient to become the necessary global agent arises as a major problem. Why? *There is no cosmo-politics*. The concept of politics derives from the link between territory and sovereignty. The concept of political freedom, as the basis for a civil society is based on affluence, an affluence which was only possible by the expansion of sovereignty into the colonies. Both concepts—territorial sovereignty and individual freedom—are therefore rooted in the exploitation of ‘cheap nature’ (i.e. cheap energy, cheap food, cheap raw materials and cheap labour), which is the basis of capitalist/socialist production and consumption. To develop an eco-social market economy, therefore, might not be that easy and may depend on the growing awareness, especially in the industrialised countries, that nature has a price and is no longer free or even for sale.

So too, *creation out of nothing challenges the concept of dominion*, which implies the control of ‘nature’. Human responsibility is of a very different nature, as a new reading of the creation narratives shows. Instead of claiming a ‘dominion’, human creatures are called to respond to creation as a gift—whereby God gives fullness out of the fullness of divine life—with contemplation and praise, as is emphasised in Pope

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<sup>33</sup> Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 43.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Keller, *Political Theology*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Keller, *Political Theology*, 156.

<sup>37</sup> Keller, *Political Theology*, 180.

Francis's Encyclical *Laudato Si*. A creation-ethic is first of all shaped by adoration. It responds to the ongoing gift of creation by praising the creator and by being grateful for the beauty and goodness of the world we live in, but also by begging and by groaning about all that destroys life and makes the world ugly and disfigured.

This response of *bringing creation before God in these four modes of prayer* is related biblically to a theology of the (unspeakable) name of God, YHWH, who stands for the presence of the absent God. The texts contain a divine self-differentiation: God, who lets the name of God dwell in the Temple and in the midst of the people Israel (as well as in Jesus of Nazareth in the NT). This representative nature of the name is reflected in the right and the responsibility of humans to name other creatures. This naming is a very respectful kind of care, doing justice to all God's creatures.

### **Creation Theology and a Realistic Approach to Nature**

Additionally, *such a creation theology frees us to be realistic about the earthly 'oikologia' and to face the real challenges of the ecological crises*. Earth system science tells us that we are not in control of the planet. Rather, we live on the 'Mantle of the Earth' (Veronica Della Dora)<sup>38</sup> in 'Critical Zones' (Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel)<sup>39</sup> that allow for the life forms we know only by very thin layers of the biosphere and the atmosphere. The earth is not ours; we may or may not find a habitat on earth. And we also know that the stable climatic conditions that we experience have only existed for about 12,000 years. The Holocene is a very short and exceptional moment in the history of planet earth. It is a wonder that homo sapiens was able to develop civilisations in this tiny habitat.

The *ethical concern* that we associate with the term 'eco', therefore, should be described with the term '*habitability*', coined by the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty.<sup>40</sup> Instead of claiming that we have

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<sup>38</sup> Veronica Della Dora, *The Mantle of the Earth: Genealogies of a Geographical Metaphor* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (eds), *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, (Cambridge MA & Karlsruhe: MIT Press & ZKM Center for Art and Media, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category,' *Critical Inquiry* 46 (2019), 1–31; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses,' *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009), 197–222.

inherited the world from our ancestors or that we have borrowed it from our children (both metaphors are problematic, because they suggest non-political family relations and conceive the earth as a commodity) we need to develop a humble concept of responsibility in view of the ecological challenges that we face.

So we have to take seriously that *our perception and interpretation of 'nature'* is the result of a historical process by which the world has been deconstructed into an object, a commodity to be dominated and exploited by human subjects. The concept of 'nature', as Pierre Charbonnier has shown in his recent 'environmental history of political ideas' is itself dependent on human 'subsisting, dwelling and knowing'<sup>41</sup>: the way 'human collectives derive their means of physical re-production', the 'territorial character of all social existence' and the 'processes by which we ensure an intellectual mastery of things'.

Charbonnier reconstructs our conceptions of society (i.e. of autonomy and sovereignty) and of nature (i.e. the very material structure of the world as well as cultural otherness) as having been co-constructed. The current ecological crises, therefore, are also crises of the political. And this goes deeper than a critique of the 'capitalist mode of production' and the 'techno-scientific objectification of the world'. Our ways of inhabiting the earth and imagining the future can no longer be upheld. Since there is no way back into a (neo-)medieval world or to a lost past, we will have to find a new way of living in the critical zone that is our habitat. Maybe we have to understand ourselves as called to live together in the 'ruins' of this habitat.<sup>42</sup>

### **Conclusion: Living in a Disenchanted World—Longing for the World to Come**

It needs to be repeated. There is no way back to the enchanted world of pre-modernity and to the 'symbolic realism' that shaped Christian theology in the first Millennium.<sup>43</sup> Nor is it possible to adopt some kind

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<sup>41</sup> Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 241.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> See: Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (London: SCM Press, 2006), 221–247.

of unspoiled indigenous world-view. The only way forward is through the critique of the disenchanting world-view, recognizing that in fact, according to Bruno Latour, 'we never have been modern'. The world we live in is not under our control and the virtual realities we create are only mirrors of ourselves. Yet, nothing prevents us from awaiting the new heaven and the new earth, of which we are told in the 'non-identical repetitions' (Nicholas of Cusa) of Christian worship. In listening to the word and feeling the breath of God we may be able to see what the world is meant to become. That sets us free from 'eco-grief' as well as from overstressing ourselves by striving to protect the 'integrity of creation'.

Karl Barth saw with great clarity that the premise of the 'natural' that constitutes the modern world-view, which is dominated by the so-called natural sciences and the exploitation of cheap nature, can no longer be upheld—not least because it makes the understanding of the incarnation as '*assumptio carnis*' dependent on the *Zeitgeist*. Instead, Barth radicalises the modern world-view by demonstrating that it does not use its critical potential for self-reflection. Theologically, he marks the border with God as 'Wholly other' and by emphasizing the 'Lordship of Christ', who not only descended and took on flesh, but ascended and draws all flesh from the old into the new creation. In this he walks in the footsteps of Aquinas, who insisted that there is no '*natura pura*' to which grace is subsequently added. Creation, in other words, is 'graced nature' (de Lubac), or, in Protestant terminology, '*creatura verbi*'. The theological methodology that Barth invites us to apply, therefore, may be described as *an analogy of the transfigured being* that we associate with the coming of Christ and the new creation.<sup>44</sup>

A consequence of this thought is envisaged especially in Orthodox theology: The Eucharist as 'an advance on the new creation'<sup>45</sup> or 'an advent of the world to come'.<sup>46</sup> The Church in bread and wine, the earth's gifts, partakes in Christ's transfiguration, his ascension from the old creation to the new. In the midst of 'angels and archangels and the

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<sup>44</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (13 part-volumes, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969–80), Vol 3,1 and 2.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 72.

<sup>46</sup> Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 77.

whole company of heaven', we eat and drink together in the very presence of God. Alexander Schmemmann understands the meal not as a representation of the absent Christ, but as an ascent of the gathered church into the heavenly Jerusalem, taking with it all humanity and all creation.<sup>47</sup> The Church is drawn up to the heavenly garden city to dine with Christ at his table and enjoy the divine fullness of life. In the epiphany of the healed and transformed creation, the cosmos is revealed as divine creation, as sacramental.

At the table of the Lord we celebrate the new creation. Therefore, we must not be frightened by the realisation that—in view of the Covid pandemic, but also of climate change or the extinction of species—our old life is over. It would be a bleak consolation to claim that everything will be all right again. The fiction of man (!) controlling the world is about to crumble. We will have to begin to 'inhabit' the highly fragile ecological niche that our current Earth Age offers us.

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<sup>47</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Yonkers NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

## BROTHER MATTHEW OF TAIZÉ: AN INTERVIEW

*The ecumenical monastic community of Taizé in Burgundy, France is for many people the very incarnation of the movement towards visible unity of Christians which has taken place since the mid-twentieth century. Its founder, Brother Roger Schutz, died violently during Evening Prayer on 16 August 2005, and Brother Alois Löser, already designated by Brother Roger as his successor, took over as Prior of the community. In July 2023, Brother Alois announced that he would resign and that he had chosen Brother Matthew Thorpe to be his successor. At the beginning of Advent the same year, Brother Alois handed over his office to Brother Matthew. Sr Ingeborg-Marie Kvam OP has interviewed him for ONE IN CHRIST.*

**SrIM** *To begin with, could you say a little bit about yourself, your background, how you came to Taizé and what attracted you there?*

**BrM** Faith has always played an important part in my life. I come from a practising Anglican family. In my early twenties, I was studying at university. It was an intense time of searching. What does it mean to follow Christ? Among my student friends, there were some who had been to Taizé. We had a prayer group which used the music of Taizé. And in the first summer holidays, they suggested we visit the community together.

Three things touched me

- the prayer of the community. The first time I entered the church, I felt immediately welcomed. There were no explanations, nobody leading the worship, just the singing into which you were drawn. I felt included and part of the community straight away.

- the way in which the brothers were present, but left the place for young people to be among themselves. They led the Bible studies, but then let us speak together with our peers. This spoke to me of their trust.

- the fact that the brothers were of different denominations seemed to be an authentic witness to the Gospel. If Christians

speak of a God of love, we need to love each other. And Jesus' prayer in John 17 points to the importance of this.

I took a year free from my studies and after some months, I realised that God was asking me to take a risk and leave everything to follow Jesus. And that continues to today. We have to listen every day to the 'Come and follow me' that Jesus says to us and set out anew on the path he opens.

**SrIM** *In December last year, Brother Alois handed over to you the office of Prior of the community. Could you say a little about how such a succession is prepared and about what happens when it takes effect? How did you experience this and how do you understand your role?*

**BrM** Brother Alois told the Community already in autumn 2021 that he would withdraw from his role as Prior, which he had fulfilled since the death of Brother Roger in 2005. He felt it was simply the time to step back, especially faced with the changes in Church and society over the past years, which inevitably affect our life in Taizé.

In our Rule, it says simply that the Prior designates a brother to assure a continuity after him. Brother Roger simply named Brother Alois. However, after initial steps, he realised that it was important to consult the community. We were asked to take time for prayer and to write down the names of one or two brothers that we could imagine as Prior.

After this consultation, Brother Alois asked me if I would be willing to take on the role of Servant of Communion, as our rule calls the Prior, in the Community.

At first, I hesitated. It is very difficult to decide alone. We need the ear of other people that we trust who will accompany us. They are not there to tell us what we should decide, but in expressing ourselves, we often see more clearly what is the way forward. I think often of the story of Moses, whom God asked to do something immense. He hesitated, but God did not reject him because of that. Moses' hesitation became the opportunity to deepen his understanding of God's calling and to receive the promise that God would always be with him.

Moses accompanies me!



**SrIM** *How do you see the role of Taizé in the wider Christian communion? Has this changed over the years?*

**BrM** We are a small community that tries to live something very simple. We are brothers of different Christian Churches who want to express a sign of unity in Christ through our lives. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 carries us. That unity is already given, though our way of living it is imperfect.

For Brother Roger, it was a struggle at the beginning to make the life of the Community understood first of all in the Protestant world from which it was issued and where there was very little monastic presence. His desire deep down was to reconcile the faith of his origins with the Catholic faith but without rejecting his roots. As Christians, we need to show that we love each other if our witness is to be authentic. His meetings with Popes John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II especially made the recognition of this inner journey possible.

And the growth of the youth meetings in Taizé meant that the community had to adapt. Brother Roger resisted the idea of creating a movement around the community, but encouraged young people to return to their parishes and local communities to live their faith. This in turn led to an increase in trust from many different Church leaders because they understood that Taizé wanted to serve the local Church and not keep the young people for themselves.

What is our role? Perhaps that is for others to decide. But what we can offer most in Taizé is a space for Christians of all denominations, and also people searching for faith, to come together to pray and reflect. If each one can discover a question, a call, that perhaps comes from deep within them, perhaps from God, then it is worth welcoming them.

**SrIM** *The past few years have seen new eruptions of violent conflict and war, both in Europe and in the Middle-East. In an international community where you welcome young people from all over the world, how does this affect you? What do you think we as Christians can do, together, faced with this situation?*

**BrM** When we look at God's wounded creation, of which our human family is a part, we ask ourselves: where do we begin? The Rule of Taizé says: 'Open yourself to all that is human and you will see all vain desires to escape from the world vanish. Be present to your time, adapt yourself to the conditions of the moment'. It is this openness to all that is human that brings us face to face with the rifts that run through the societies of our time. And that costs us. I have often travelled in Russia, and yet my heart is torn apart by what is happening in Ukraine. Adaptation requires an openness to the human, a conversion of our depths and not a submission to some ideology that would only increase mistrust and division.

How are we called to be present as a community in the wounds of the human family? We cannot seek to be builders of unity or pilgrims of peace without listening to the voices of those who suffer from deadly conflicts or the violence that is increasingly lurking in our societies. In Taizé, we are in the rare position of often knowing people from both sides. Some of us will feel a call to maintain these bonds of friendship. Could this be a way of preparing paths of peace and unity for the future, even if we cannot speak lightly of peace? There can be no lasting peace without justice for all, especially those who suffer. How does this challenge us? Look at how many times in the Gospels Jesus crossed the barriers of separation between enemy peoples. Speaking of his life given up for all on the cross, St Paul tells us of Christ: 'In his person he killed hatred. He came to proclaim the good news of peace, peace for you who were far away, peace for those who were near'. (Eph. 2:16-17)

But, as I said above, the most precious thing we can offer in Taizé is a space where people can meet and pray. Perhaps unexpected encounters may take place leading to something we never dared hope for.

**SrIM** *Another question many ask themselves is how to live as Christians in an increasingly secular society and how to meet new challenges, especially at the pastoral level. These questions probably also come up in Taizé and in your encounters with youth. Could you share a little on how you respond?*

**BrM** Secularism can be positive. It can mean a certain freshness on the part of young people who do not have the baggage that was often associated with faith in the past.

The questions are many, but climate change and ecological urgency are on the minds of such a lot of young people. There is a real anxiety for many. And this leads us to re-examine our faith. What is our role in God's wounded creation? As Pope Francis says often, everything is linked and we have a responsibility together for our common home.

And then there are all the questions linked with gender and identity. This comes more and more today. We need to listen well to discern the real questions that are deep down and not to judge too quickly or to say what needs to be done. Patient listening and accompaniment are essential.

These are questions which were not present in the same way twenty years ago and we need to be ready to learn.

**SrIM** *You mention climate change, which is an issue high on the agenda for a number of Church leaders, but also, and especially, for many young people. This seems to be a privileged area of encounter and joint efforts, not only for Christians, but for people of all faiths and none. Do you see a still unused potential here? How do you in Taizé relate to creation and to environmental issues?*

**BrM** Yes, as I said above, these questions are very important for young people. And they can be a meeting point with people of all faiths and none at all. As we work together on these questions, they can become an important factor for peace and common understanding.

In Taizé, we have engaged with environmental issues for many years, but that has become accentuated in recent times, partly because young people have become more demanding.

Simple gestures like collecting the cold water that comes before the hot water arrives for a shower and using it to flush the toilet raise personal awareness of the issue for everyday life. Sorting our rubbish, making our own compost, the planting of a permaculture herb garden, beehives for making honey, our own flock of sheep, water-recycling, using solar panels and

computer servers also for heating water, making hard decisions about means of transport, a carbon footprint study... The list is long.

The important thing is to do what we can within our own means. 'With almost nothing, we can do a lot' was a phrase that Brother Roger repeated often and it still holds for today.

And the encyclicals 'Laudato Si' and 'Laudemus Deum' by Pope Francis are a roadmap for many of us. We are all called to take responsibility for our common home.

**SrIM** *Finally, could you say a little bit about the background for the 'Together'-event and the Ecumenical Vigil in Rome in September?*

**BrM** How did 'Together' begin? At the opening of the Synod in October 2021, Brother Alois, my predecessor as prior of Taizé, invited to participate, shared several thoughts. The first was of the importance 'that there should be on the synodal journey moments to breathe, like halts, to celebrate the unity already achieved in Christ and to make this visible,' in order to nourish a dialogue on a path where the great diversity within the Catholic Church will be revealed.

Brother Alois then told of how Pope Francis often encourages us to dream. He shared his own dream that 'in the course of the synodal process, not only delegates but the people of God, not only Catholics but believers from the various Churches be invited to a large ecumenical gathering' in which young people might be the facilitators. Our common baptism unites us in Christ already, despite the imperfections that still remain as we seek full communion.

These suggestions were favourably welcomed. Br Alois was encouraged by Pope Francis to develop the project. He spoke with Card. Grech of the Synod Secretariat and Card. Koch, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. Both gave the go ahead. But he felt from the outset that this should not be a 'Taizé Gathering'. The synodal process encourages us to listen to others and to journey with them. From the beginning, we sought to involve partners from different movements, communities and Christian Churches.

This question led us: how can the synodal pathway which is taking place in the Catholic Church become a powerful moment in the search for unity among Christians and the whole human family, and how can we encourage the involvement of young people in this process?

Gradually a programme was worked out, more partners involved and further preparation meetings organised in November 2022 in Taizé and in March 2023 in Rome, when Pope Francis received us and encouraged us to go forward. The date was finally fixed for 30 September 2023, just before the opening of the Synod, with a weekend of events for young people who would be hosted by the parishes of Rome. From humble origins, something beautiful was being prepared. As a sign of our common journey, this Gathering of the People of God was named 'Together'.

I am very grateful to Brother Alois for his boldness in setting in motion the 'Together' Gathering of the People of God, which made such an impression on so many people at the opening of the synodal session in Rome.

**SrIM** *What are your thoughts on the significance of an ecumenical prayer vigil on the eve of the Catholic Synod on Synodality? What could this imply for the way forward, not only for the Roman Catholic Church, but for all the Churches?*

**BrM** For the ecumenical prayer vigil in St Peter's Square shortly before the opening of the first session of the Synod on Synodality in the Catholic Church, 18,000 participants were there for this Gathering of the People of God 'Together'. Twenty different Church leaders took part including Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury and Revd Dr Anne Burghardt of the Lutheran World Federation, as well as Reformed, Oriental Orthodox, Pentecostal, Methodist and Baptist leaders. At the end, they gave a blessing all together. This was a special moment. It implied that they recognised each other's blessing! Does that imply a recognition of the each other's ministry? How can we build on this?

All the participants in the Synod were present. Many said that the vigil had played a role in the prominence given to ecumenism in the Synthesis document. Does this mean a new opening within the Roman Catholic Church to the ecumenical journey? And the 'fraternal delegates' from other Churches who took part in the Synod were made to feel very welcome. How will they speak of this experience in their different Churches?

Could we move towards common blessings given at all our celebrations where priests and ministers may be present and not just reserve this for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity? Would that be a way of increasing our mutual recognition in the eyes of the People of God?

**SrIM** *Do you have any thoughts on the future of the ecumenical movement, how Christians can find a way forward towards deeper and truer unity?*

**BrM** On the way back from Ljubljana after our European Meeting at the start of this year, we stopped in Milan. A friend who knows us well asked me if we could still talk about unity between Christians when there are so many people, especially young people, who simply have no interest in the faith. Yet these two realities are intimately linked.

The Rule of Taizé exhorts us never to take 'sides in the scandal of the separation of Christians who so readily confess love of neighbour, but remain divided'. The word scandal is strong. Do we remember that enough? In the prayer in chapter 17 of John's Gospel, which is inscribed in our hearts as brothers and sisters, Christ places the credibility of his sending by the Father on the witness of mutual love between those who follow him. Would the scandal consist in knowingly going against this prayer of Jesus?

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches today on this subject? How is the Spirit challenging us?

## SAINT IRENAEUS JOINT ORTHODOX–CATHOLIC WORKING GROUP

### Communiqué—Balamand 2023

At the invitation of His Beatitude Patriarch John X (Yazigi) of Antioch, the former co-president of the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox–Catholic Working Group (2008–2012), this group gathered for its 19<sup>th</sup> annual meeting, 21–25 June 2023, at the Orthodox Theological Faculty St John of Damascus in Balamand (Lebanon) to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Balamand Document. The meeting was chaired by the Orthodox co-president Metropolitan Serafim (Joantă) of Germany, Central and Northern Europe (Romanian Orthodox Church). The Catholic co-president, Bishop Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg, was unable to attend.

At the opening session, the Working Group was welcomed by Patriarch John X, Dr Elias L. Warrak, President of the University of Balamand, and Archimandrite Dr Jack Khalil, Dean of the Theological Faculty. In his speech, Patriarch John X emphasized the importance of the collaboration that occurred at the Balamand meeting in 1993 and the difficult situation of Christians in the Middle East.

In its first plenary session, the group welcomed Dr Marie-Hélène Blanchet, Research Director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and Fr Dr Gabriel Alfred Hachem, theology professor at the Université Saint-Esprit Kaslik. Also participating as observers were two doctoral students from Balamand and one from Kaslik.

The Working Group considered the history of attempts to resolve the schism between Catholics and Orthodox leading up to the Balamand Document, the document itself, as well as its subsequent reception. Its findings are summarized in the following theses.

### **On the Road to Balamand: The Councils of Lyons and Ferrara-Florence**

#### *The Second Council of Lyons (1274)*

(1) Among the three topics that the Council of Lyons (1274) dealt with (planning and carrying out a new crusade to the Holy Land, union with the Greeks, internal church reforms), union played only a minor role. The Council of Lyons was understood to be primarily a political

alliance. However, it did play, among other things, an important role in confirming the doctrine of seven sacraments for Catholics, which was partly received by the Orthodox. The reception history of this council has not yet been written.

(2) Reception is a fluid concept, even within the same tradition, and the process of reception is complex and can be influenced by particular interests. The Second Council of Lyons is a good example of this because, from the Catholic point of view, papal primacy, in particular, has become the *leitmotif*, while from the Orthodox point of view, the rejection of the Union is in the foreground.

#### *The Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-45)*

(3) The Council of Ferrara-Florence has recently been dealt with in our ecumenical dialogues. It marks the final conciliar attempt to resolve the schism between the Latins and the Greeks. However, it failed insofar as communion was not restored on a lasting basis, in particular because the Orthodox did not accept the *filioque* and refused to recognize papal primacy as defined by the council. In addition, it was flawed in numerous ways, including the concessions required of the Greeks and the limited representation of the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem.

(4) Widely rejected by the Orthodox as a pseudo-council both in its own time and subsequently, the Council of Ferrara-Florence generated considerable debate amongst the patriarchal sees of the East. Other subsequent attempts at union resulted in local unions, such as the one of Brest in 1596 and the establishment of a Church united with Rome in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. These later unions used the theological arguments of Ferrara-Florence regarding the *filioque* and primacy, as well as the right of Eastern churches to keep their own liturgical rites.

(5) Nonetheless, unlike Lyons II, Ferrara-Florence remains in some respects a potentially constructive reference point in the ongoing search for unity, for example in its language of mutual rapprochement, its affirmation of equality of standing between representatives of East and West, and its limited but significant attempts to make provisions for the Orthodox (for example, the attempt to explicate the *filioque* in terms of the Greek patristic tradition, the association of papal primacy with the acts of the ecumenical councils and sacred canons, and the affirmation of all the rights and privileges of the Eastern patriarchates).



(6) Subsequent to the Council of Ferrara-Florence, both sides adopted a more exclusivist ecclesiology with union being pursued by other means. The connection between Florence and the birth of Eastern Catholic Churches from the sixteenth century onwards remains a topic of considerable controversy.

(7) The Council of Ferrara-Florence came at a unique historical moment given that, due to the rise of conciliarism, the papacy was, for once, willing to engage in real theological dialogue with the Greeks. It thus represents a missed opportunity for a genuine ecumenical council. The transition to the uniatism of the sixteenth century as a method for suppressing schism is a controversial subject. This transition corresponds to a transformation in the approach to unity.

### **The Balamand Document (1993)**

(8) One result of the collapse of the communist regimes and the ensuing religious freedom was the resurgence of the Greek Catholic churches. They posed a challenge to the Orthodox churches, particularly with regard to church membership, the restitution of church buildings, and the restructuring of parishes, which led to tensions between communities.

(9) These developments were seen by the Orthodox as a form of uniatism and proselytism. The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church dealt with this in the Freising Declaration (1990) and the Balamand Document (1993).

(10) The principal contributions of the Balamand Document are the rejection of proselytism or of uniatism as a model of union, the condemnation of all forms of coercion of conscience, the recognition of the Eastern Catholic Churches' right to exist and to care for their respective flocks, and the understanding of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches as 'Sister Churches' possessing apostolic succession and sacramental fulness.

(11) The Balamand Document itself does not provide precise definitions of uniatism and proselytism. These, however, can be found in the preceding Freising declaration: "The term "Uniatism" indicates [...] the effort which aims to bring about the unity of the Church by separating from the Orthodox Church communities or Orthodox faithful without taking into account that, according to ecclesiology, the Orthodox

Church is a Sister Church which itself offers the means of grace and salvation' (6b). 'Every effort aimed at having the faithful of one Church pass to another, [...] is commonly called "proselytism"' (7c). The Balamand Document excludes 'for the future all proselytism and all desire for expansion by Catholics at the expense of the Orthodox Church.' However, it confirms that 'the Oriental Catholic Churches [...], as part of the Catholic Communion, have the right to exist and to act in answer to the spiritual needs of their faithful' (3).

(12) The Balamand Document rejects the method and model of uniatism 'because of the way in which Catholics and Orthodox once again consider each other in their relationship to the mystery of the Church and discover each other once again as Sister Churches' (12). A considerable weakness lies, however, in its failure to elaborate on the meaning of the term 'sister churches'. This term has not always been univocally understood and received. On one hand, some Orthodox consider it problematic because it implies the full ecclesiality of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the Note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the expression 'sister churches', issued in 2000, perceives this term as obscuring the real existence of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church confessed in the Creed (11).

### **The Reception of the Balamand Document**

(13) The reception of the Balamand Document has been problematic among both Orthodox and Catholics, especially with respect to the concept of 'sister churches'. On the part of the Orthodox, the spectrum of reactions ranged from approval to sharp rejection. For example, the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală welcomed the Balamand Document as prophetic and as marked by honesty and humility, while the abbots of the Mount Athos monasteries seriously criticized this document. The Moscow Patriarchate held its own series of discussions with the Holy See on its consequences.

(14) On the part of the Eastern Catholic Churches, opinions on the Balamand Document were also very diverse. While the Greek Catholic Church in Romania sharply rejected the text, the Melkite Greek Catholic Church deemed it a sound initiative for reunion.

(15) One result of the Balamand Document's failure to resolve the issue of uniatism was the breakdown of the official international Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue at Baltimore (2000). This breakdown, which

lasted until 2006, prompted the establishment of the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group in 2004.

(16) Successful dialogue between our churches includes issues of historiography and reception. For example, a common narrative of the history of uniatism called for by the Balamand Document (30) is yet to be fully articulated. Reception at the scholarly and ecumenical levels requires an integration of methodologies incorporating theological with source-based, historical, and socio-political approaches. Reception in practice concerns the visible and embodied dimensions of popular piety and liturgical enactment (e.g., the use of azymes, the diptychs, and the recitation of the Creed with or without the *filioque*). Catholics and Orthodox would be well advised to engage in a conversation about the meaning and criteria of reception, including the criteria for determining the *sensus fidelium/pleroma*.

### **The Balamand Document and Pending Issues**

(17) While the Balamand Document did not propose any new model of communion, it suggested a pastoral collaboration, called 'Practical rules', which unfortunately was not fully implemented. This kind of pastoral ecumenism, illustrated, for example, by the pastoral agreements between Catholics and Orthodox in Lebanon and in the Middle East (cf. agreement of Charfeh, 1996) is a promising way of building fellowship in the life of our Churches.

(18) The reception of the Balamand Document in Lebanon is evident in addressing pastoral issues (e.g. especially inter-denominational marriages). Accordingly, in the pastoral context, there has been closer cooperation between Greek Orthodox and Catholic Churches on the one hand, and Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox Churches on the other. The fate and testimony of the two metropolitans of Aleppo, from different churches and kidnapped together ten years ago, symbolically reflects this growing fellowship among Christians in the Middle East.

(19) The concept of 'double communion' proposed by Greek Catholic Archbishop Elias Zogby to re-establish communion with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, a project officially adopted by the Greek Catholic Synod and submitted to the Greek Orthodox Synod in 1996, was eventually rejected because of its ecclesiological and canonical ambiguity (cf. Irenaeus Group, Communiqué of Trebinje, No. 9). Despite its failure, the dynamic of rapprochement should be revived,

taking into account the pastoral reality and the participation of all members of the People of God in a spirit of synodality.

(20) The war in Ukraine also raises serious new ecclesial issues, including the relationship between church and state, the confusion between ideology and theology, as embodied in various cases of phyletism in different Christian traditions, and the intensification of the stereotypes that affect intra-Orthodox and ecumenical relations. These stereotypes include the East–West divide and the use of the pejorative term ‘uniates’. These issues may also offer opportunities for advancing dialogue.

During the meeting in Balamand Metropolitan Serafim announced that he would like to resign as Orthodox co-president for reasons of age. The members of the Irenaeus Group unanimously elected their long-time member Grigorios Papatomas, Metropolitan of Peristeri since 2021, as the new Orthodox co-president. At the end of their meeting the members of the Irenaeus Group expressed warm thanks to its two Lebanese members, Fr Rector Michel Jalakh and Professor Assaad Elias Kattan, for their personal engagement in organizing this meeting, to the St John of Damascus Institute for Theology of the University of Balamand for hosting the meeting, and to the Antonine University in Beirut for its hospitality during the stay of the members in Beirut. The Irenaeus Group was also very grateful to the regional ecumenical family ‘That All May Be One’ who accompanied the meeting with prayers and fasting.

*The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox–Catholic Working Group is composed of 26 theologians, 13 Orthodox and 13 Catholics, from a number of European countries, the Middle East, and the Americas. It was established in 2004 at Paderborn (Germany), and has met since then in Athens (Greece), Chevetogne (Belgium), Belgrade (Serbia), Vienna (Austria), Kyiv (Ukraine), Magdeburg (Germany), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Bose (Italy), Thessaloniki (Greece), Rabat (Malta), on Halki near Istanbul (Turkey), Taizé (France), Caraiman (Romania), Graz (Austria), Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Rome (Italy), Cluj-Napoca (Romania), and Balamand (Lebanon). It was decided in Balamand to hold the next meeting of the Irenaeus Group in September 2024 in Germany.*

## ECUMENICAL PRAYER VIGIL ‘TOGETHER’

**Sr Carolina Fjelstad\***

What makes a simple event transform into a historical moment? Surely one should be careful about using such lofty terms, especially before time has done its work in separating the appearance of things from their lasting fruit. Nevertheless, I am sure that I was not the only one among those having participated in the ecumenical prayer vigil in St Peter’s Square in Rome on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023, suggesting that what we experienced was something out of the ordinary, even, ‘historical’.

I had travelled with the Prioress from our Community of Grandchamp in Switzerland, to Rome to participate in that ecumenical prayer vigil on the threshold of the Opening of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops—the Synod on Synodality, in the Catholic Church. Our journey was in response to the invitation of Pope Francis to Christians of all denominations to come and pray *for* and *with* the Catholic Church at this crucial point in its synodal process. The invitation, to my ears, was extraordinary in itself as it seemed to convey a powerful message: ‘Synodality, searching how to move forward together (the word “synod” coming from the Greek *syn odos* which means “walking together”), cannot be an isolated event in one single church; if we want to move forward on the way of faith, of discipleship and of faithful testimony as Christians, we need one another.’

And the message was indeed received. Among the thousands who made their way to St Peter’s Square that evening were Christians from many different countries, traditions and denominations, young and old, bishops and homemakers. Leading the prayer together with Pope Francis were church leaders from Orthodox, Oriental, Anglican and Protestant traditions as well as representatives from the ecumenical movement worldwide. These arrived in procession and were seated facing each other in two semi-circles, and at the same time turning towards the centre of the podium where the San Damiano Cross was

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\* Sr Carolina Fjelstad belongs to the monastic community of Grandchamp, Switzerland, which brings together sisters from different churches and various countries. Their ecumenical vocation commits the sisters on the path of reconciliation among Christians and within the human family, and to respect the whole of creation.

placed. The image of church leaders thus placed, facing each other and turning towards the cross, conveyed another powerful message: when we come together as Christians, Christ is at the centre, inviting us to let go of rivalry and struggles, calling us to sisterhood and brotherhood.

There were present not only those carrying great responsibilities in the church. The diversity among the participants owed a great deal to the brothers of Taizé who, at the request of Pope Francis and in collaboration with local churches, had organised a weekend gathering which symbolically encircled the prayer vigil gathering: *Together—Gathering of the People of God* brought together young people, and some less young, from different countries and denominations who were welcomed by resident communities and parishes from all over Rome. The programme included workshops on varied topics as well as a worship service in the Lateran Basilica (picture this cathedral of Rome filled with young people in prayer and worship). This service in turn became the point of departure of a pilgrimage through the streets of Rome in which thousands of Christians from different denominations were ‘walking together’, sharing as they went, until reaching their goal—St Peter’s Square and the ecumenical prayer vigil.

We arrived at St Peter’s Square like pilgrims coming together from all the corners of the earth: those who had made the long walk from the Lateran Basilica, those who were joining the vigil from many other parts of the city, and the church leaders who entered in procession onto the podium. Our prayer commenced with a time of thanksgiving, expressing gratitude for the gifts of unity, the gifts of the other, of peace and of creation. Each part was interpreted by different groups and individuals and expressed by different creative means. There were testimonies from men and women sharing their life experiences, their suffering and their hope. There was music and song as well as a live representation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. While this moment brought to light the diversity of gifts, expressions and experiences within the church it was so much more than a simple display of diversity. By receiving as a gift what these others had to share, their experience somehow became my experience, or rather, a *shared* experience. Through the movement of giving and receiving, a community, a communion, a unity, a body, seemed to be created among those who were participating in that movement. It was an authentic experience and embodiment of ‘church being’ and of becoming church together.

This was my abiding impression throughout the evening. As we sang, listened to Scripture, joined in intercession for the world, for the Church and for the synod and its delegates, a communion was created as if a 'spirit of fraternity' was set in motion. I remember the brief meeting with a young catholic couple from Poland who were profoundly touched that their friends from an evangelical parish had come with them all this way to pray for their church. I recall the woman from the outskirts of Paris who did not know much about the synod but for whom the important thing was to 'pray together'. I recollect the ten minutes of silence in which we were invited to 'remain before the Lord who is present and unites us.' It was the silence of thousands of people from many church traditions and different social and cultural backgrounds, listening together in worship and prayer. I remember the gesture that both opened and closed the prayer vigil: the Bishop of Rome amongst fellow bishops and church leaders standing beside one another before the cross in prayer and adoration. These moments remain inscribed in my memory as effective signs of the unity that is possible when we let Christ take central place—'like one flock, loved and gathered by the one Shepherd, Jesus,' as Pope Francis voiced it in his homily towards the end of the vigil.

Even now, some months after the event, I live with the enduring impression of having caught a glimpse of the Church in that profound unity given to her in Christ: a unity whereby the differences—in social situation, capacity and ability, in ecclesial tradition and position—are not obstacles but, rather, the very building stones. I think the invitation of Pope Francis opened the way that evening to what we could live together. It had not been an invitation to come to witness the great works of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, it was a humble call to sisterly and brotherly *communion* at what he understood to be an important and delicate time in the life of this church: 'Come pray for us, come pray with us.' And perhaps it is the humility of this call, to share not only in the riches of the other but also in their poverty, that made it possible for so many to respond. If this indeed is the case, may this experience serve as an open pathway for us all on the way towards the fullness of Christian unity—that it is not primarily by showing others what we have to offer that we enter into communion, but by letting them know that we need them, in order to be what we are called to be.

The struggles and difficulties that exist within and between our churches remain. And I think that is why we need moments such as this—where, as we are praying, turning our eyes and hearts towards the Cross, listening to the Word of God and to one another, opening to the joy and suffering of our brothers and sisters, listening to the voice of creation, listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit within us and among us, we become aware of the unity which we have been given, which is already there; and where for a brief moment in time we are revealed to ourselves; like an image in relief, showing forth what we truly are as Church and what we have yet to become. Where a simple pilgrim event is transformed into a historical moment.



## THE 22<sup>ND</sup> INTERNATIONAL INTERCONFESSIONAL CONFERENCE FOR RELIGIOUS

### Sr Ingeborg-Marie Kvam OP\*

From 31 August to 5 September 2023, the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Interconfessional Conference for Religious (CIR) took place at Korsets kloster/Stjärnholm, Ålberga/Nyköping in Sweden.

As explained on the website of the Conference, the CIR was founded by Father Martin Zabala, a priest in Bilbao, Spain, episcopal delegate for Unity, in the hope of creating links of friendship between Religious of different denominations. Its aims are

[t]o live the joy of Christian unity we already have in religious life, to know each other's traditions, history and churches in the hope of creating friendships between us, and to deepen our devotion to Jesus Christ, in fidelity to our own Churches and following the teachings of Holy Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

The aims of the Conference thus resonate with what Pope John Paul II wrote in *Oriente Lumen* about the role of religious life in the ecumenical endeavour:

The strong common traits uniting the monastic experience of the East and the West make it a wonderful bridge of fellowship, where unity as it is lived shines even more brightly than may appear in the dialogue between the Churches.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to knowledge, I feel that meeting one another regularly is very important. In this regard, I hope that monasteries will make a particular effort, precisely because of the unique role played by monastic life within the Churches and because of the many unifying aspects of the monastic experience, and therefore of spiritual awareness, in the East and in the West.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ciirblog.wordpress.com>.

<sup>2</sup> *Oriente Lumen* 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Oriente Lumen* 25.

Guided by this vision, consecrated men and women from different Christian traditions and different countries come together for a week every two years to form a community of prayer and life.

The 2023-meeting was unique in the sense that, already at the level of organisation, it was an example of concrete ecumenical collaboration. The small Syriac-Orthodox monastic community of Korsets kloster (the Monastery of the Cross), which was to be the host community, simply could not accommodate the 47 participants in its current buildings. Therefore, the Church of Sweden acted as co-host, and we were welcomed and catered for in the beautiful retreat centre of Stjärnholm, close to Nyköping in the South-East of Sweden about an hour from Stockholm.

The theme proposed for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Conference was ‘How can our treasures become our gifts?’

As is the custom of the CIR, talks on the chosen theme were given by representatives from the different traditions: Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Reformed. Brother Charbel Rizk of Korsets kloster opened on the first morning with his reflection ‘Sharing a Wounded Heart’, where he considered the contribution of monastic life to ecumenism. Healing the wounds in our own hearts through ascetism, prayer and community life, makes us better able to help heal the wounds in the Body of Christ.

The Roman Catholic representative, Father Jonathan Cotton OSB of Ampleforth Abbey, England, was unfortunately prevented from attending in person, but had kindly recorded his talk. We could thus hear his voice present to us what he considers to be the specific treasures the Roman Catholic tradition can offer as gifts to other Christians: the Eucharist, Mary, the Papacy, the different charisms of religious life and ecclesial movements.

Brother Charlie Annis CR from the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, England, made the important observation that often it is only when someone welcomes our gifts that we ourselves recognise them as treasures.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the way to discover our riches is not so much trying to identify them for ourselves, but rather to give ear to what others have to say about us, what they recognise as valuable in our tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Annis makes the same point in his article ‘Two-and-a-Half Cheers for Receptive Ecumenism’ in the current issue of *One in Christ* (editor’s note).

Finally, Sisters Annette Bader and Dorothee Weisser from the community of Deaconesses in Riehen in Switzerland shared with us some of the treasures both of their Reformed tradition and of their particular community and their personal histories. Their testimonies inspired and encouraged us to go treasure hunting in our own traditions and histories, both communitarian and personal, to discover the, often hidden, gifts they contain.

Each talk was followed by reflection together in smaller, language-based groups. Perhaps the most important observation emerging in these discussions was the fact that the most valued treasures are treasures we share, regardless of our spiritual tradition or denomination: the gifts of community life, of elderly Brothers and Sisters, of prayer and worship, of living a consecrated life... Even the inevitable challenges and hardships (often enough the flip-side of the treasures) were discovered to be more or less the same everywhere. This insight is significant for the larger ecumenical movement too. Is it not true that many of the joys and challenges of Christian life today are the same for every church community? All the more reason, then, to rejoice and work together rather than separately.

In addition to input on the theme, participants were given the opportunity to get better acquainted with the host-tradition(s). Brother Charbel presented for us the Syriac-Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, with its history and tradition. From the Church of Sweden, the Reverend Ingrid Norén Nilsson gave us a presentation of this Church both past and present. She also gave a brief introduction to Saint Brigid before we visited the church and monastery museum of Vadstena.

Each day the Eucharist was celebrated according to the liturgy of the different traditions, and time was set aside for moments of silent prayer for unity in common, as well as morning and evening prayer with the host communities: Morning Prayer in the Church of Sweden's chapel and Vespers in the Syriac-Orthodox Monastery and Parish church. The Sunday Eucharist was celebrated with the Syriac-Orthodox parish of Saint Gabriel in Norrköping, where we were most warmly welcomed and catered for in every way.

Particularly moving was a moment of common prayer in front of the memorial for the victims of the Sayfo (the Assyrian genocide in 1915). Brother Charbel recalled for us the words of the Syriac-Orthodox

Patriarch at the inauguration of the monument: 'Never forget. Always honour. But also: Always forgive.'

Another highlight was the Lutheran Eucharist celebrated in the cathedral of Vadstena on the last day. After days of deep sharing, it gave us a taste of the unity that already exists between us, despite the fact that we still found ourselves separated at the Lord's Table. It is to be hoped that the tension created by these two realities, a sense of real union and at the same time painful separation, will spark new fervour in all those who experienced it, to pray and work for the day to come when we will finally be able to share the one bread and the one cup.

The almost tangible fraternity and friendship between those who have attended the CIR regularly for years presented a positive vision for those who attended for the first time: lasting communion can grow out of these meetings. Another sign of hope, both for ecumenism and for religious life, is that a good number of the participants were in the age-group 30–50. The prospects for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Conference, which will be held in 2025 at the Anglican convent of Tymawr in Wales, are promising.

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