

President's Remarks

Archbishop John Bathersby

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ

I am honoured to be able to address you for the first time as President of the National Council of Churches in Australia. When I was elected President in July 1997 I was deeply conscious of both the privilege and the responsibility. Privilege, because of the great joy in being able to play a role, no matter how small, in the universal movement of God's Spirit towards unity; responsibility, lest I waste the opportunity of leadership and be found wanting in this important stewardship.

I have no doubt that the establishment of the National Council of Churches in Australia in 1994 was a most important step in the Christian history of this nation. I am also aware of the importance of an occasion like this Forum, which is not only an opportunity to discuss Christian business but, as David Gill has said, also an opportunity to develop Christian Relationships, which in the long run may be the most important thing we do with these next four days.

I am doubly blessed myself, first of all in being appointed in the footsteps of Archbishop Baliozian, the founding President, who as a person of deep faith, immense wisdom, and profound holiness established his leadership upon a foundation of prayer that has been my inspiration and guide. I am also blessed in that I had the assistance of David Gill whose faith, ecumenical experience, great intelligence, and wonderful organizing ability has made my presidency the fun job the Cardinal promised it would be, when I allowed my name to be submitted in 1997. I am also delighted by the honour of being President as we enter a new millennium, which I believe will be a time of special graces for all Christians.

Those of us who are old enough to remember the painful separations of the past, know just how far Australian Christians have travelled in the last fifty years. Recently in Brisbane, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the World Council of Churches, a young Anglican priest said that although he is not old enough to remember the stone throwing, real and metaphorical, of the past, nevertheless he is aware of his debt to the ecumenical movement in that the two most powerful influences in his life on the road to ordination were a Uniting Church lecturer from Trinity College on the one hand, and a Catholic spiritual director from Banyo Seminary on the other. He understands just how impoverished his life and faith would have been without these people. So do we all.

The ecumenical movement is good for a number of reasons, not the least of which is our own selfish desire to grow in faith. We cannot afford to neglect the wisdom and insights gained by our respective traditions in separation, lest we preach an impoverished Christ to others.

As we enter a new millennium we can no longer afford the diminishment we have suffered in the past because of our separation, nor can we afford to preach a divided Christ to Australians who under the weight of our secular society are seeking spiritual answers to life, more urgently than ever. Therefore structured opportunities such as this Forum are needed more than ever today, as we work for God's Kingdom, as are opportunities for dialogue and co-operation at all levels. Ultimately, however, I still believe that the most direct pathway to unity may be found on our knees before God, asking God's Holy Spirit to lead us ever closer to Christ, and ultimately to each other. With prayer we may even be able to see those things that we are still doing to each other that may be equally as devastating and destructive as the stone throwing of the past. But can I mention some signs of hope.

1. This afternoon David Gill and I spent some hours with the Youth Network, listening to them and hearing their passion for ecumenism [we also found ourselves doing push ups on the floor which is not to be recommended for sixty year olds].

In the Archdiocese of Brisbane I have made Ecumenism one of the priorities of the Archdiocese. As part of our Pastoral Planning I receive a Pastoral Area Report at "Wynberg" at least once a month. In my recent comments on a report I pointed out that it was short on ecumenical emphasis. Afterwards, one of those present said to me: "Archbishop, don't be too concerned about Ecumenism in the future because our children are much more open to that possibility than we ever were, and they will make it happen much more effectively than we could imagine". There is a new generation arising that is just as committed to truth as we ever were, and yet who have the distinct advantage of not being burdened by the hurts, real or imaginary of the past, nor by some of the stereotypes and caricatures of other Christians that weigh us down. They will do great things for us if we allow them to and if they can afford to wait for us to catch up with them.

2. A second sign of hope is that we are moving towards the year of Great Jubilee 2000. One of the great thrills of my life, God willing, is that I will be alive in that year. But what an incredible time it could be for Christians if only we can make people aware of its significance and its opportunity for making a fresh start. Not many people have yet begun to realise the marvel of being alive at this turning point of the millennium. I believe it could well be a time of incredible grace for all as barriers between individuals, nations, and Churches come tumbling down. I do believe in miracles and am optimistic enough to believe that great things will happen at that time. Both Konrad Raiser and Pope John Paul II understand the opportunity happening but that Christians need to structure opportunities for genuine repentance before that time – an honest acknowledgement of evils perpetrated against one another in the past. Do we have enough faith, courage, honesty, and determination to do that? I believe we have.

Finally just a few reflections about the NCCA

[i] In the first place we need to clarify not only for ourselves but for all Christians the goal of Ecumenism. Despite much clarification in today's marvellous papers and in the workshop there is still much confusion among people in the Churches. People want to know what the World Council of Churches means when it talks about the "goal of visible unity" as it did in its 5th assembly in 1975.

They want to know what the Pope means when he talks about "full visible unity".

They want to know what Konrad Raiser means when he talks of "a conciliar and dialogical understanding of Church unity that has emerged over decades of ecumenical discussion".

I was delighted by the discussion that was taking place today in the wake of the excellent papers presented. It can only help us achieve this greater clarity about what we are seeking.

[ii] In the second place there is a need for the member churches to own the NCCA. This certainly means rejoicing in membership, but it also means adequately funding this new body so that it can do the job it was meant to do. At the present time many of the committees seem to exist on the funding they can attract from member Churches, depending on what is seen as the relevance or not of their activity. David Gill has talked frequently about his frustration with this whole area of finance. Perhaps at some time in the future it needs to become a major agenda item for an NCCA Forum. The Council's present attempts to raise funds may solve some of these problems. It remains to be seen.

[iii] In the third place I still don't believe we pray enough for the unity of all Christians. Like Martha we are busy about many things – dialogues, networks, inter Church co-operation. But do we see ecumenism as an urgent part of the total evangelization of the world that we all seek when we pray: "Lord may your kingdom come, may your will be done".

In his recent Encyclical "Ut Unum Sint" John Paul II asked Christians to respond about the role of Papacy, and his particular exercise of that role. A great number of responses have been written and that is marvellous.

But he also asked for all Christians to pray for his conversion to Christ. It was a remarkable request and I would like to quote his words: "the Bishop of Rome himself most fervently makes his own Christ's prayer for that conversion which is indispensable for 'Peter' to be able to serve his brethren. I earnestly invite the faithful of the Catholic Church and all Christians to share in this prayer. May all join me in praying for this conversion!" [p.8]

The invitation was issued in 1995, but I wonder how many Christians have even thought about that invitation with as much energy as they responded to the earlier invitation on Papacy. Who knows what might happen if the Pope's request for prayer were taken seriously?

So thank you all very much for the honour of the Presidency. I look forward to spending these days with you in the Forum. Please support me with your prayers.
