

PRE-NCCA FORUM SYMPOSIUM ON ECUMENICAL ISSUES

Response to Paper by Rev Dr Michael Kinnamon, entitled: *Report from the frontlines of a movement under siege*

An Ecumenical Movement under siege? Seen from the bilateral experience

by

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Theological Introduction

The Ecumenical Movement is a movement of Christians, and indeed of the church universal. From his extensive international experience and insights, Professor Michael Kinnamon has given us a most helpful and challenging overview and analysis of the ecumenical movement today. I now wish to respond from the perspective of the **bilateral dialogues** between the denominations of the church.

To assess any situation of the church, including **whether or not any movement within it is under siege, and how the bilateral discussions, local, national and international, are progressing**, we must always take our beginning point theologically. We must begin from the heart of things.

Let us first therefore go to the very heart of our existence as Christians, and as the church universal. The inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world. Equally, God's inexplicable grace and will to be God with, and for, humanity implies that we should always understand our life as Christians theologically. These simple, yet profound, facts derive from the mystery of the triune God not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to make God's very life intersect with the unity of the Son of God with us. Our theological basis as Christians and as the church is in the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with sinners, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might through him come

close to God. At the heart of our faith is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly body of his Son, who is its heavenly head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the peace which God has established for creation.

If the being of the church and its life is predicated upon the grace of Jesus Christ, as itself defining God's action in the world for the reconciliation of creation, including humanity, then its life is that which it receives from him. The church's very existence will be shaped by the manner in which it confesses this truth to be its very life.

Against this theological background of our hope secured for us in Christ, we see the current situation of the ecumenical movement from the point of view of the **bilateral dialogues**.

Within this theological context, I wish to make **three points**.

First, the **success** of bilateral dialogues needs to be **worked through**. Let me take one example, in which I was deeply involved. Between 1992 and 2004, Archbishop John Bathersby and I were the Co-Chairs of the Australian National Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia. Before this, the Dialogue had produced *Make Straight His Way: Stages on the Road to Unity* (1980), setting out the issues between the Catholic Church and the Uniting Church (and its predecessors). Our major project during those years was the production of the Report entitled: ***Interchurch Marriages: Their Ecumenical Challenge and Significance for our Churches***, published in 1999 (St. Paul's Publications & Uniting Church Press, Strathfield, NSW & Melbourne, Vic., 1999). The principles in this publication could be applied to all situations of interchurch marriage. This was a practical, down-to-earth report, with practical advice, pastoral suggestions and liturgical models. It dealt with an issue which traditionally had been very divisive in Australian society, that of so-called "mixed marriages". The issue had been vitiated by the *Ne temere* decree and the violent Protestant reaction to that decree in the past. We looked at the issue in a fresh light. Instead of seeing interchurch marriages as a problem to be managed and controlled, we rather saw it theologically as a foretaste of the coming future united church, of which we all dream. From that starting point we looked at how pastoral care should be arranged, and at how the liturgy should be executed. Without breaking any church rules, we saw how a Marriage or Nuptial Eucharist in such circumstances could be celebrated, provided there was permission given by the Catholic bishop and priest and the

Uniting Church council and minister. This is a significant national breakthrough. It has received the national endorsement as a possibility by both churches. It could be used as an ecumenical template for other churches too. However, a major point is that, although its possibility has received national endorsement, it has not yet been fully implemented, because clergy have not in all cases sought the required permissions. This needs to be done more widely.

Second, and not unrelated to the first point, the issue of the **reception** needs to be **more widely implemented**. In general theological terms, this area has been emphasised internationally by William Rusch and Mary Tanner. In our situation here in Australia there was a major development with the signing of the *Covenant* at the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) Forum in Adelaide in 2004. In the history of ecumenism in Australia there have been three milestones: first, the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977; second, the formation of the NCCA in 1994, with the membership in it of the Roman Catholic Church; and third, the *Covenant* between the NCCA Churches in 2004. In this *Covenant* we promised to carry out things of major international significance. Some churches were able to make particular recognition with other churches. However, two very significant promises we made to each other: first, that we would not buy, sell or construct properties without consulting each other; and second, that we would only engage in mission (whether evangelism or social justice) ecumenically, that is after consulting each other. These two were aspirational. We have not succeeded in implementing them totally. We need to press on to really carry out what we have covenanted to do.

Third, we need to be aware of **consistency** in our ecumenical relations. Both churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (and their affiliated councils) and the Roman Catholic Church have committed themselves to the search for Christian unity, the WCC since 1948 and the Catholic Church since Vatican 11. Both have been consistent and therefore we should always stress the committed aim to carry this out. One recent factor in helping us along this way has been the development of the theme of “Receptive Ecumenism”, developed by Professor Paul Murray of the University of Durham in the UK. This is closely related to a major theme of international bilateral dialogues in which I have been involved, as seen in particular in the two dialogue reports of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (2006) and *Encountering*

Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments (2011). This theme has been the **exchange of gifts**. This is seen, for example, in the following paragraphs of *The Grace Given You in Christ*, as follows:

151. For the sake of a mutual exchange of ecclesial gifts and endowments, Catholics are invited to give concentrated attention to:

- (1) Their ecclesial identity in order to distinguish what is essential and what might be changed or let go of for the sake of Christian unity;
- (2) Lay leadership in the Church and the participation of lay people in instruments of authority by virtue of their Baptism;
- (3) Christian conference as an instrument of authority and reception in the Church;
- (4) The contribution of women to the Church's ministry;
- (5) Personal and corporate forms of assurance and the Church's corporate assurance as the context for the infallibility of the Pope.

152. For the sake of a mutual exchange of ecclesial gifts and endowments, Methodists are invited to give concentrated attention to:

- (1) Their ecclesial identity in order to distinguish what is essential and what might be changed or let go of for the sake of Christian unity;
- (2) The historic succession of bishops and the individual exercise of *episcopé* within a collegial ministry of oversight;
- (3) The exercise of universal primacy for the sake of unity and as an expression of the universality of the Church;
- (4) The Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome as a final decision-making authority in the Church;
- (5) Personal and corporate forms of assurance and the infallibility of the Pope within the context of the Church's corporate assurance.

Further, we see this in the following paragraphs:

156. For the sake of a mutual exchange of ecclesial gifts and endowments, Catholics are encouraged to:

- (1) Invite Methodists to experience different forms of worship and spiritual devotion in the Catholic Church;
- (2) Investigate the boundaries of permissible ecclesial diversity in the Church;
- (3) Value the contribution made to the life of the Church by small groups meeting for fellowship, prayer and mutual pastoral care;
- (4) Develop more effective means of Bible study for lay people as well as personal reading of the Scriptures by individuals;
- (5) Promote the place in Christian worship of evangelical preaching and corporate hymn singing;
- (6) Reflect upon and be inspired by the example and witness of John and Charles Wesley.

157. For the sake of a mutual exchange of ecclesial gifts and endowments, Methodists are encouraged to:

- (1) Invite Catholics to experience different forms of worship and spiritual devotion in Methodism;
- (2) Investigate the boundaries of permissible ecclesial diversity in the Church;
- (3) Promote the Church's sacramental ministry to the sick and dying, and the sacramental use of material things;
- (4) Consider making a weekly Eucharist the norm in their pattern of Sunday worship;
- (5) Explore Catholic forms of spiritual devotion such as the Stations of the Cross and the veneration of Mary;
- (6) Reflect upon and be inspired by the example and witness of the saints through the ages.

Finally, this is seen in the following paragraphs:

161. For the sake of a mutual exchange of ecclesial gifts and endowments, Catholics are called upon to:

- (1) Empower lay people to take a full and active role in the mission of the Church;
- (2) Encourage the contribution of personal evangelism to the mission of the Church;
- (3) Study the diversity of ecclesial structures raised up by God to advance the Church's mission.

162. For the sake of a mutual exchange of ecclesial gifts and endowments, Methodists are called upon to:

- (1) Develop a greater awareness of the testimony made to the Gospel by the saints of every age and place;
- (2) Consider bishops as nodal points in the web of communion for mission across space and time;
- (3) Recognise that the diverse forms of spirituality and ecclesial life in the Catholic Church exist in order that men and women may grow in holiness.