

Called to Common Witness

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In 1981 the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches produced a report entitled, Common Witness. I would like to quote a paragraph from it:

When he prayed that all be one so the world might believe (John 17:21), Jesus made a clear connection between the unity of the Church and the acceptance of the Gospel. Unhappily Christians are still divided in their churches and the testimony they give to the Gospel is thus weakened. There are, however, even now many signs of the initial unity that already exists among all followers of Christ and indications that it is developing in important ways. What we have in common, and the hope that is in us, enable us to be bold in proclaiming the Gospel and trustful that the world will receive it. Common witness is the essential calling of the Church and in an especial way it responds to the spirit of this ecumenical age in the Church's life. It expresses our actual unity and increases our service to God's word, strengthening the churches both in proclaiming the Gospel and in seeking for the fullness of unity.

I would like to repeat the second last sentence: "Common witness is the essential calling of the Church and in an especial way it responds to the spirit of this ecumenical age in the Church's life." In describing what common witness might involve, the text emphasised two different dimensions. Firstly: "Through proclaiming the cross and resurrection of Christ, they affirm (i.e. those engaged in common witness) that God wills the salvation of his people in all dimensions of their being, eternal and earthly." Secondly, it recognised: "(Common witness) means Christian involvement in matters of social justice in the name of the poor and the oppressed."

Right throughout the history of the World Council of Churches there have been tensions between the different movements which brought it into being. For example, there is a tension between the Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) stream/movement/programme and the Faith and Order or Christian Unity movement/stream/programme. In their earlier forms, these two movements were present and participated in the formation of the World Council of Churches fifty years ago. However, it was only in 1961 that the International Missionary Council became part of the World Council of Churches. As someone who has been most involved in the Faith and Order stream I have continually argued for its importance, indeed its necessity, in the World Council of Churches and the larger ecumenical movement. However, I have to say that whatever marginalisation I may have imagined had occurred for Faith and Order or the quest for Christian unity, such marginalisation is nothing in comparison with the marginalisation of the missionary movement within the larger ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches. The missionary movement has always been "the poor relation".

Many ecumenists seem to be either focussed on the world and its need for justice, peace and the protection of the environment, or on the churches and their need to come together in Christian unity. I do not deny that working for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is integral to the mission of the church and unity between the churches is crucial to its mission. However, I believe that the foundational missionary dynamic of wishing to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world very seldom comes to the forefront in ecumenical programmes or even, I fear, in the heart of many ecumenists. Everyone easily points to the Johanne text containing Jesus' prayer that we would be one so that the world might believe that it is the Father who sent him, but we are too easily side-tracked into affirming only the first part of his prayer: "that they/we may be one"; or unconsciously concluding it only with: "so that the world will exist in justice, peace and protective of the integrity of creation."

Last year, the fourth phase of the International Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and some representatives or members of classical Pentecostal Churches came to a conclusion. The topic for the phase, from 1990 to 1997, was Evangelisation, Proselytism and Common Witness. It's a very interesting document because, as many would know, in parts of Latin America there can sometimes be great tensions between the Roman Catholic Church and Pentecostal Churches because of the rapid growth of the latter at the expense of the former. In paragraph 118 of the Report, a kind of definition of 'common witness' emerges:

Common witness means standing together and sharing together in witness to our common faith. Common witness can be experienced through joint participation in worship, in prayer, in the performance of good works in Jesus' name and especially in evangelization. True common witness is not engaged in for any narrow, strategic denominational benefit of a particular community. Rather, it is concerned solely for the glory of God, for the good of the whole church and the good of humankind.

There is no suggestion in the report, in fact the contrary, that such common witness between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals would be easy. Later in No. 122 the report indicates that when it speaks of common witness it is not suggesting that there should be any compromise involved in making this possible. On the contrary, "Common witness is not a call to indifference or to uniformity" it says. The report clearly affirms that common witness does not prevent individuals, communities or churches from witnessing to their own distinctive heritage and, indeed, witnessing separately on matters about which they disagree. "However," as it says, "this can be done without being contentious, with mutual love and respect."

I think this document stands as a testimony to the fertility of the ecumenical movement through the generous loving activity of the Holy Spirit. It also stands as a challenge to churches like our own which are very often willing to bear common witness on issues of justice, but sometimes less willing to bear common witness to the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. I believe both forms of witness are essential and integrally related. To offer Jesus Christ to a society is to offer the way of life which he came to initiate in our world and that means to offer justice, peace and care for the environment.

But common witness does mean offering Jesus Christ. Have some of us perhaps become just a little reticent about this? Is one reason for such reticence the fact that we have entered into dialogue with our culture and with other World Religions? If reticence is a result of such dialogue, we have misunderstood the nature of dialogue. Authentic dialogue presupposes genuine witness. There is no value in dialoguing with "the other" whoever that may be if we are not truly ourselves, and to be truly ourselves is to be truly Christian, to be truly disciples of Jesus Christ. In our case it means being truly convinced that he is the way, the truth and the life.

I would hope we go much further than we already have as Christian churches in our dialogue with World Religions. I would hope that we have enormous respect for the gifts of our culture and the signs of the Spirit that are there before we even utter one word of the gospel. At the same time, I believe we carry within ourselves and in our communities an enormous treasure which is the knowledge and love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and I would hope that we are willing to offer this gift, the greatest of all, to our society —and to do it together.

If we are so willing, and presumably many are, the question arises of how we might deal with those matters about which we disagree. There is already a common faith which all could proclaim and to which all could bear witness which has become obvious in our ecumenical dialogues, both bi-lateral and multi-lateral. I have in mind especially the results of the WCC Faith and Order Commission project "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today." This study has explored our common faith as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and has thereby laid a rich and broad foundation for common witness by a very wide range of Christian churches.

Some churches might not see the need for even all that has been discovered in this very important study. They would be content for churches to come together around a simple message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Some of these would not consider many of the different beliefs and practices of churches outside of this core as affecting the essentials or the fundamentals of the gospel. Common witness for these Christians only becomes difficult if they believe another church has compromised this basic message by their doctrines or practices. They would need to be assured of this first.

Others would want to affirm the essential interconnectedness of the various truths of salvation as found in the scriptures and proclaimed in the credal formulas of the Church through the ages. While they too would begin with a simple message of salvation and also believe that this was a non-negotiable essential core, proclaiming the fullness of the gospel for them would lead them deeper and deeper into the full faith of the church through the ages as they have come to understand it. So there would be other essentials for them, less central but still integrally part of the gospel or the Apostolic Tradition or the Word of God as they understand it. They would not want any partners involved in common witness to suggest that other truths of the faith which they hold dear are peripheral or even questionable. These latter churches would want any common witness to draw people back to the church of their baptism, if such people have already been baptised but have drifted from the church. Such matters would need to be addressed with sensitivity before common witness could take place in an effective way.

Evangelisation, or evangelism, with all the challenges which I have just outlined has to be an integral part of the common witness of Christian churches. But it is not all of it. Integral to bearing witness to or living the gospel is the way in which we live and the kind of world we are called to work for by the grace of God. To proclaim Jesus and not also to be willing to proclaim reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, for example, is to proclaim a Jesus who is not the Jesus of the gospels. At the same time, to proclaim justice and peace and the integrity of creation but not Jesus is to offer only the fruits and not the source of the new life our world needs so desperately.

Our very coming together here and our very willingness to worship together is itself a common witness to Australia that we are in earnest about what we share and our desire to share it even more deeply — and in common. However, we need to ask what it is that Australians might expect to hear from us as a result of these three days. Perhaps they would expect to hear about our steps towards unity or about our social concerns and their social failures. Would they expect to hear about God and about the life and hope that Jesus Christ came to offer us? Sadly, I do not think Australians would be expecting too many of such words from us any more. Mind you, the right words are not easy to find. I find it hard to find them myself, because I would want Jesus himself to be heard and encountered in any proclamation I offered, and I know how easily I convey something less than Jesus Christ by my lazy, simplistic or individualistic account of him and what he desires to offer our society. Only he can show us the way Only he can enable us to discover the right words. Maybe we could reflect together on why we sometimes appear so tongue-tied — and he might even loosen our tongues.

I would like to repeat by way of conclusion, the point made in the paragraph first cited from the Joint Working Group: "Common witness expresses our actual unity, increases our service of God's word, and strengthens each of our churches both in our proclamation and in our seeking of the fullness of unity with each other." In other words, to struggle with all the issues that arise in trying to bear witness together will not only strengthen the witness itself, our proclamation of the gospel itself, but also our movement towards Christian unity. Not to struggle with the issues that arise around common witness is to seek Christian unity as an end in itself, forgetting the prayer of Jesus: "Father, that we may become one so that Australia will believe that it is you who sent him."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

I wish to acknowledge a number of things before opening up this question for discussion.

Firstly, I have been deliberately provocative, at least thought-provoking, in order to stimulate discussion on what I consider a very important question.

Secondly, I have spoken out of my own Catholic tradition and my own position in that church. There may be others here who would see the question quite differently and may have found my language or approach unhelpful. I am sorry if I have caused any disquiet for them.

Thirdly, I especially acknowledge that I am a Western Christian and have not in any way tried to address the approach or the concerns of Orthodox Christians. It would be good if we could hear them in our discussion.

Fourthly, I wish to emphasise again that I am deeply committed to working for Christian unity and for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

All these things having been said, I now would like us to discuss the following questions:

- Am I right in my analysis of the priority given to evangelism/evangelisation in the ecumenical movement and in the NCCA?
- Are we truly tongue-tied?
- If you answer "yes" to the above question, please consider the following questions:
- Ought proclamation of Jesus be more central to the NCCA and to the ecumenical movement in general?
- What can we do to make that happen?

If you answered "no" to the above question please bring forward examples of how we are giving due weight to this dimension of the ecumenical movement. You might also consider how we might do this more fully or with greater enthusiasm.