

HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION WITH  
CHRISTIANS OF OTHER CHURCHES/DENOMINATIONS AFFECTED YOUR  
OWN PERCEPTION OF EUCHARISTIC COMMUNION?

The answer to this question requires something like a resume of a lifetime's experience, though certain times in my life will prove to be more important than others. You will be relieved to know that this is not a full scale autobiography. My family background is relevant. At the time of their marriage and the birth of the majority of their children neither of my parents was a Roman Catholic. My mother's parents were Congregationalists, though they went to church in the Anglican parish church when my mother became a member of the choir there. My father's parents were not regular churchgoers, though my paternal grandmother occasionally attended social events at the local Methodist chapel. I myself was christened into the Church of England and with my brothers and sister attended Sunday school at the parish church and were friendly with the curate and his children since we were of the same age. It is to him and them, as much as anybody that I owe a positive understanding of the priesthood as a desirable state of life.

When I was ten both my parents became Roman Catholics, together and with them me and those of my brothers and sisters who had then been born. It meant a change, and one that was not explained, probably because it would have involved more than a ten year old could understand, but from the term in which I was ten I attended the Roman Catholic School and went to Mass at the Catholic church, where my father stoked the coke fuelled church boiler and my brothers and I served Mass. The liturgy was still in Latin and as well as Sunday morning Mass there was an evening service. This was the regular way of things in the Roman Catholic Church in England at that time. It was the end of long period of Catholic reticence and the beginning of a feeling that at last some Roman Catholics at least were beginning to take a prominent and rightful part in public life. I was not aware of the Irish dimension of Catholicism at that time. That came later.

I was at the time a boy scout and this meant on at least two occasions having the chance of attending a service in an Anglican church. Before the first of these, one of the scout leaders, himself a Roman Catholic, led me and other Catholic scouts of the parade so that we should not enter a church belonging to a community which was not our own. It was the church at which I had attended Sunday school and other services like Harvest Festival and Christmas celebrations. Before the next service, only a matter of months later, the Roman Catholic priest made it clear that the prohibition on entering the churches of other denominations no longer stood and that we were to take part in the service to which we were going, though since this was in another town the first Anglican church which I entered as a Roman Catholic was not the one to which I had once belonged.

You will see that in reflecting on 'communion' I am doing so to begin with in the context of discovering communion in my own Church, and that I am thinking of 'communion' existentially rather than as a theological reality which

might be taken to have a definition of one sort or another and which may be claimed to exist in a particular community or to a greater or lesser extent. You will also see that some of this reflection is retrospective and that I am trying to express past feelings in a present idiom, or it may be that I am reading present feelings back into a past situation to which I still have an attachment.

Because I had expressed an interest in being a priest around the time I took my eleven plus, it was arranged that I should go to Cotton College for my secondary education. This was a school in the care of the diocese of Birmingham. It made a claim to be the oldest Catholic grammar school in England and had been founded by Bishop Challenor at Sedgley Park near Wolverhampton in 1763. There were, I think, fourteen priests on the teaching staff and two laymen, no women. It was there that the vernacular liturgy became part of my life (we went to Mass every day) and a particular Catholic tradition became mine. This was a sort of reticent Roman Catholicism, which venerated the martyrs of the Reformation, though not excessively, which lived a regular life which avoided flamboyance. It was not the Catholicism of Brideshead. It was devout and devoted, committed to the conversion of England. Its roots have been described by J D Crichton in *Worship in a Hidden Church* and by Frank Roberts in *A History of Sedgley Park and Cotton College*. It was not the Church as Newman described it in *The Second Spring*, but a flavour of it is to be had in Judith Champ's paper on Challenor and his work in London. It was at Cotton that I came across Irish Catholicism and its intense commitments. It did not appeal to me. I was a Roman Catholic but not of this kind. So there was a sort of impaired communion there.

After school I studied for seven years at the English College in Rome. The Council had ended only a few years before and my sort of Catholicism was not welcomed. Not that I arrived in any missionary spirit. What characterised English College Catholicism was supreme self confidence. We were going to convert England but it was going to be to a radical Church, which challenged society, broke down barriers and saved the world. But now people were talking about ecumenism. I was in the Sistine chapel when Archbishop Coggan visited Paul VI. He and a number of other Church of England Bishops stayed at the English College. Cormac Murphy-O'Connor was rector and he agreed to an exchange scheme that only half worked in which Anglican students at theological college stayed for a semester in Rome. This raised the question of inter-communion and the Anglican students remained uniformly courteous in accepting the discipline which prevented them from receiving Holy Communion during Mass in the College chapel. I found some of these students more congenial than my Roman Catholic companions, not just because of personality, but also because of a connection to those earliest Sunday school days. I had sense of belonging to something more than a restricted Roman Catholic community, even though that was where I belonged and belong and am held there by a complexity of ties.

I found a similar affinity among the members of the first Clergy Fraternal that I belonged to as a curate in Walsall. We were a mixed bunch but my invitation to belong to it was an expression of spontaneous goodness. All apart from me had gathered for their regular meeting. They had heard that there was a new curate at the Mount. A phone call was made: would I like to join them there and then? I

would and did. We kept Christian Unity week together and there were committed members of all the Churches, congregations etc who worshipped and worked together. From that group two things emerged, but unfortunately after I had left, the Caldmore Covenant and the Walsall Town Centre Ministry. There was a communion there which bore the fruit of the Holy Spirit, but why might one think that to be the sort of communion which cannot be expressed in receiving Holy Communion? There are answers to that question but they depend on a meaning of 'communion' which works with divinely instituted structures and which, for the moment, are where the difficulties lie.

When I went to Oscott in 1983, it was to become a member of a joint enterprise with Queen's College a few miles away. The Joint Course on the Eucharist had brought the Colleges together and made students of one institution briefly students of the other and the members of staff colleagues. There is not time to recount the ways in which each College developed with the assistance of the other, but that they did was attributable to a sense of common purpose: priestly or ministerial formation, a common service of a single but divided body, the Church, and a common vocation, the priesthood. It was at Queen's that I first met women priests. They were Methodists and United Reformed Church members. Anglicans came later. One of the most interesting things about working with Queen's was observing an ecumenical foundation grappling with its inner tensions and maintaining a balance between the demands of authentic priestly formation, demands of a variety of diocese, the imposition of theological fashion and accommodation of a variety of worship. It seemed to me that they and Oscott with them, though not to the same degree of awareness, were a single body trying to serve the same Lord through the same ministry. In other words there was a complex theological reality there in process of emergence which was not a human construction and which was not being forged for its own ends and whose energy, while being strenuously human, was also divine.

There are individual personal experiences which could back that up, but the most significant was working both with Ian Torrance, Christina Le Moignan and Paul Collins in actually preparing the Joint Course and with Neil Messer on a session on the Eucharist as Sacrifice which confirmed this sense of a body expressing different doctrines being committed to get hold of a fundamental unassailable reality which is true. There is communion there which cannot be sidelined. It was at Queen's too, as at Walsall that connections were made again with my early Sunday school years.

And they continue to be made. Now that I am at Stafford, I celebrate a Roman Catholic Mass every fortnight in an eleventh century Anglican Parish Church. The general ecumenical scene in Stafford is not good from my point of view the structures of Churches Together seem to have replaced the pastoral contacts of the clergy fraternal. So my most significant ecumenical relations are in a village seven miles from where I live, where all the ministers, the Anglican Vicar and Deacon and the Methodist minister, are all women. We have services together during Christian Unity Week, on Good Friday, at Pentecost and on Remembrance Sunday. The congregations mingle formally and informally. There is in what we are attempting something of the same reality, which I think,

has to be called priesthood, which transcends gender, though not faith, in owing its origin to the nature of Christ and the purposes of God. I am not tempted to move outside my communion in the restricted sense of the Roman Catholic Church, nor to play down divinely instituted structures, but I do wonder why these formal structures of communion may be held to trump the existential communion built up in the course of the revealing of Christ's body, to the extent that Holy Communion should only be permitted on particular occasions.

It is not my suggestion that we should try to answer that. I note it as the present state of my own ecumenical reflection and a question I need to find an answer to not to burden others with.