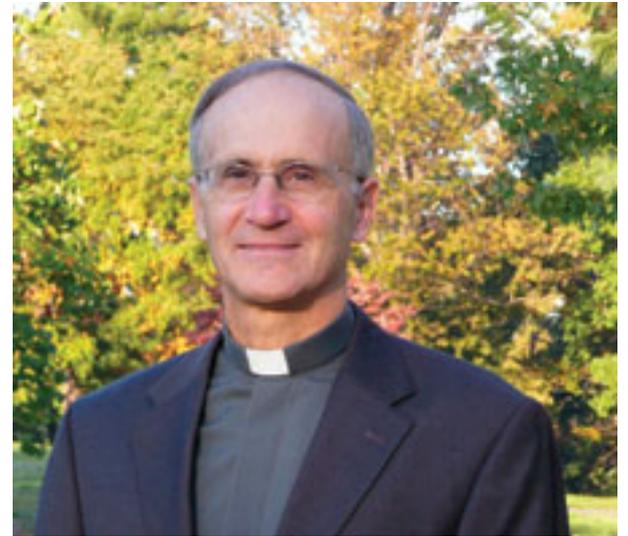


Third International Receptive Ecumenism Conference: A Report

Thomas Ryan, CSP

Over the past decade, the Centre for Catholic Studies within the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University in England has been hosting a series of events devoted to developing and modeling a fresh new strategy in ecumenism referred to as Receptive Ecumenism.[1]



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The essential principle is that the primary ecumenical responsibility is not to ask “What do the other traditions of Christian faith need to learn from us?” but “What do we need to learn from them?” The assumption is that if all were asking this question seriously and acting upon it then all would be moving in ways that would both deepen our authentic respective identities and draw us into more intimate communion.

The approach by no means sets aside hope for organic, structural unity, but recognizes that it’s not going to happen soon. So, in the meantime, what will keep us on the path of continuing conversion towards an ever more visible unity in sacramental life, shared service, mission, and decision-making?

Receptive ecumenism offers itself as an interim strategy to keep some wind in the sails. It’s a remarkably simple but far-reaching strategy that now places at center stage a value that has already been implicitly at work in all genuine ecumenical encounters: What can we learn and receive from the other that would enrich and strengthen our own faith and practice?

In 2006, the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham hosted an international research colloquium on the theme “Catholic Learning and Receptive Ecumenism.” In 2007 a practically focused research project was launched with the aim of exploring how this strategy could be helpful to local churches in nine major denominations in Northeast England. January 2009 saw the second International Conference at Durham, this time on the theme of “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to be Church Together.”

Receptive Ecumenism III

The third international conference took place June 9-12, 2014 at the Jesuit Fairfield

University in Connecticut around the theme of “Receptive Ecumenism in International Perspective: Contextual Ecclesial Learning.” This conference pressed the issue of receptive ecumenism in the complex contexts of global Christianity and in relation to some of the sharpest issues providing causes of tension and division within and between the traditions.

The Fairfield conference, jointly organized by Dr. Paul Lakeland and team at the Center for Catholic Studies (CCS) at Fairfield and the CCS in Durham, England, brought together about 125 people from five continents—Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals, as well as other traditions. The conference represented a kind of “global village” experience, and provided a rare opportunity to listen to Christians from other continents talk about grassroots challenges and opportunities for receptive ecumenism in their home contexts. The following few examples offer but a little taste of the topics and exchanges that took place between those whose work is in academia and those who are leaders in various church communities.

In the opening plenary, Archbishop David Moxon, Director of the Anglican Center in Rome and co-chair of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, addressed the fight against modern slavery and human trafficking, saying that there’s an exponential rise in both with 29 million slaves today, three times more than in centuries when slavery was an accepted part of society. Countries at the top of the list are China, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Russia. “No one church can effectively combat these practices,” he said, “but together, yes. No one of us is as strong as all of us. We need to receive strength and support from one another in this battle.”

Rev. Dr. John Gibaut, Director of the Commission on Faith and Order for the World Council of Churches (WCC) , reflected on how the last five years have been the Best of Times and the Worst of Times.

Best: The Report on Classical Reception from the Joint Working Group between the Vatican and WCC. The 2008 meeting of the Secretaries of all the dialogues. The 2012 meeting on Reception in the Global South. Cardinal Kasper’s book *Harvesting the Fruits*. The 2010 Edinburgh centenary celebrations of the inception of the ecumenical movement. The Faith and Order Commission’s convergence text in 2012/13 on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

Worst: The largest Christian population is now in the global south—Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific—and it’s here that the reception of the work of the dialogues is at its lowest. “It’s discouraging,” said Gibaut. “But receptive ecumenism has given a stimulus to

classical, theological ecumenism by putting reception in general back on the agenda. In short, receptive ecumenism is good for business. We all have something to learn from each other. The theological dialogues are in their own way perspectives that the churches need to receive. And receptive ecumenism is about renewal."

The Exercise of Authority

In the plenary on Receptive Ecumenism in the North American context, Dr. Catherine Clifford from St. Paul University in Ottawa, framed questions we're facing relative to ARCIC's 1999 agreed statement on *The Gift of Authority*. "Anglicans are struggling to introduce ways of making decisions that would be binding on the whole Communion. Unilateral actions by different provinces have weakened koinonia in the world Anglican Communion. And Catholics, for their part, are being asked to consider participation of laity and clergy in synodal bodies. Has the collegiality of bishops called for at Vatican II been implemented?" asked Clifford. "Do current structures of the Roman Curia respect episcopal oversight?"

Clifford observed that when Anglicans's look at the exercise of primacy in the Catholic Church, and Catholics look at the exercise of synodality in the Anglican Communion, neither are sure they want to receive it in its present form and exercise. She expressed the hope "that Pope Francis' call for a more pastoral and missionary structuring of the Church will open us to learning from others and receiving their gifts."

Mary

Mary was the object of focus in the plenary on Receptive Ecumenism in a Latin American Context: Catholic and Pentecostal Learning in Relation to Mariology. Monsignor Juan Usma Gomez of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity noted that Catholic Charismatics alone represent a larger constituency than any historical Protestant Church in Latin American. But Dr. Nestor Medina, a Pentecostal professor at Regent University in Toronto, said that there is a distinct difference between Catholic charismatics and Protestant charismatics and Pentecostals: devotion to Mary. She continues to be a contested symbol in Latin America.

Pentecostals see themselves as Christocentric, but tend to regard Catholics as suffering from *Marianismo* (the subjection of women thru devotion to Mary). What is it about Marian devotion that's perceived as keeping women "down"? More dependency than agency. Motherhood as opposed to being a single woman. Mary as suffering servant. There is, however, some commonality of perspective in that Pentecostals also perceive her as a model of holiness and virtue, faith and trust.

“We need to create favorable conditions for this dialogue,” said Medina. “Catholics and Protestants in Latin American don’t look at each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. There are some exceptions, e.g. Cuba, where Protestants have no problem relating to Catholics.” In the discussion period it was observed that, while many who were formerly Catholic have become Pentecostal, the flow goes both ways; there are a lot of Pentecostals going back to Catholicism because of Mary. The acceptance/rejection of Marian devotion is one of the main points of cleavage.

What might the contribution of receptive ecumenism be here? A way forward is to see Mary as a model of charismatic life. She entered into an intimate relationship with the divine, and was the first to receive the promise of the Spirit given to others at Pentecost. Thus she embodies our eschatological hope to become Spirit-filled and invites us all to deepen our pneumatology.

Ecumenical Education

In the African plenary, the provincial superior of the Jesuit East African province, Fr. Orobatoro, SJ, said that there are prospects and promises as well as challenges and obstacles for receptive ecumenism. Prospects: “Africa is now in a sense the center of the Christian world,” he noted. “It has been very receptive to Christianity and it has made it its own. In 1910 there were 7 million Christians in Africa; and today, 470 million!”

Challenges: Christianity in Africa is not simply Christianity. “Traditional African beliefs and practices have not disappeared, and the divisions of Christendom,” Orobatoro reported, “are writ large by spawning home-grown churches that seek to legitimate their distinctiveness and their separateness. All these evolving and mutating ecclesial units defy easy identification and complicate the work for Christian unity.”

This is further exacerbated by the relative paucity of the theological study of ecumenism. “Ecumenical consciousness barely registers outside the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” said Orobatoro. “If receptive ecumenism prioritizes mutual learning and listening, of paramount importance are those institutions dedicated to ecumenical education. In the prevailing context of denominational separation, the different churches have remained in tolerant and peaceful coexistence.”

At the same time, reflected Orobatoro, African religions model an openness to learn and to receive from others. They avoid contestation and antagonism. They exercise hospitality and mutuality. They live an informal receptivity. “The methodology of receptive ecumenism will find a kindred spirit in African spiritual and religious traditions. But it is an enterprise not yet begun rather than a failed project,” he said.

Anglican Bishop Tengatenga of Southern Malawi and Chair of the Anglican Consultative Council concurred that before there could be African bilateral dialogues, there needs to be some sustained theological education. Further, he identified another angle of challenge for receptive ecumenism on the African continent, asking "Are some continents more equal than others?" The post-colonial language of mother-daughter churches doesn't go down well, he noted: "Mother churches take all the initiatives and their decisions are presumed to be binding on the daughter churches. Traditionally 'reception' has been understood to be the faithful receiving some statement or document from 'the top'. It has to be a two way street to find out what the true *sensus fidelium* is. Is 'the top' ready to receive from 'below' as well? What is agreed in the West and North tends to be taken as what is acceptable in the South and East as well. But is it? This is the challenge of receptive ecumenism in the African continent."

Triple Dialogue

In the Asian plenary, Dr. Edmund Chia, from the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, picked up on the colonial theme noting that most churches in Asia were established as part of colonial expansion, and this is what links them to the rest of the "third world" churches. "Asians have been so much on the learning end regarding Christianity," he said, "that the emphasis of receptive ecumenism just states the obvious."

Asians, said Chia, are engaged in a triple dialogue: with the poor, with other religions, and with their culture. "Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have a long history here," he said. "Asian Christians have been pressed to find their own place in Asian culture. Evangelization must show compassion toward the suffering and relate to other religions as friends if not as family. Ministry to the poor is an integral expression of the liberation brought by Christ, and the churches must collaborate in their service ministries."

And this is only a smattering of the *plenary* sessions! In addition there were three workshop sessions, each with five options to choose from, each led by conference participants around a different topic and its relationship to or potential for receptive ecumenism. The days began with morning prayer services from Iona Abbey in Scotland, and ended with a celebration of the Eucharist in the Reformed, Catholic, and Methodist traditions on successive days.

In summary, receptive ecumenism invites church members to ask themselves where the specific difficulties in their own tradition lie and how they might fruitfully learn in these regards, with appropriate testing, from other traditions. It starts with humble recognition

of the wounds, tears, and difficulties in one's own tradition and asks how the particular and different gifts, experiences, and ways of proceeding in the other traditions can speak to and help to heal these wounds that elude the capacity of one's own tradition to heal itself. [2]

It might simply be observed that one of the particularly laudable characteristics of receptive ecumenism is that it encourages the sharing of concrete interim-fruits at local levels, and does not just focus on the final finish line of full unity. As such, it makes a vital contribution to the critical task of keeping the ecumenical movement moving.

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[1] Paul Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] See also: Paul Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism", *The Ecumenist*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Spring, 2014), 6,7.