

Reflection for ARC Group 11 May 2007

I wanted to start my reflection this evening by giving you a little sense of my own story and family background – I hope that this will root a little the context of my Catholicism and hint at the unlikely circumstances that led to my own engagement with questions of ecumenical dialogue and the practices of spiritual and eucharistic communion.

My roots are in a large immigrant-Irish Catholic family who settled in the Manchester area and who by and large remain within the North West of England. Faith was strong on both sides of my family and Catholicism was the fundamental glue in an often complex set of family dynamics. I spent the best part of my childhood believing that the world divided into Catholics and everyone else – who naturally I understood to be 'Protestant'. I lived on a street for the first 13 years of my life in which almost every family was Catholic and young, with my aunt, uncle and cousins living at one end of the street and my grandmother eventually round the corner. The Church was on the parallel street and my catholic primary school round the other corner. It was an urban, white, lower middle class/upper working class social reality in which the smells and sights and sounds were those of a small, tight-knit, upwardly mobile catholic community. In many ways this provided for a privileged childhood in which faith was central, but it was a world in which schooling, religion, socialising and employment happened largely within a circle of cultural and religious sameness. Even writing now about this experience feels a little like stepping through the back of a wardrobe into another world. I really don't think this kind of Catholic world exists anymore – in fact I think it had ceased to exist by the late 1980's, as my younger sister hit her teens.

My experience at University was therefore the first time that my social, cultural and religious world were significantly challenged, and this happened at a number of levels: in Cambridge I was faced with English Catholicism for the first time, and the comfortable faith of my childhood was shattered as I experienced difference within my faith community, I also experienced my first bruising encounter with ecumenism: I was rejected for membership of the Christian Union because 'Catholics weren't Christians'! And studying political and social theory challenged my understanding of the institution of the Church, of the kind of theological anthropology which underlay views of human embodiment and gender relations.

Seven years later I met and married a Church in Wales priest and at this point found myself becoming fully involved in the life of both Anglican and Catholic communities in North Wales. This became the productive context in which I began to understand that Christian Unity was a corporate *dis-grace* that marred the face of faith in the world and not the burden of the few. I felt viscerally for the first time and at a spiritual level my own radical incompleteness as a Catholic. Having our first child and making the usual agonising choices that inter-church families have to make further compounded this sense of scandalous division and lack of wholeness.

Perhaps the most significant experience of spiritual communion and the dilemmas of Eucharistic communion have been played out for me in my work context. In 2004 I was appointed to the staff of Westcott House in Cambridge as Director of Pastoral Studies and Tutor in Pastoral and Practical Theology. . I teach in a Federal institution in which Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and URC students, lay and ordained are formed for ministry side by side guided by the motto 'roots down, walls down'. It is a well know truism that Theological Colleges are intense even quite odd and potentially damaging places – and I

have certainly found this to be true, but I have also found theological college life to be a place of great blessing in unimagined ways. As a lay Catholic woman involved in pastoral ministry as well as theological teaching I have never been so well supported, encouraged, challenged and accepted as I have in this Anglican community. It is a privilege as a Catholic woman to be involved in the training of men and women for the Anglican priesthood and to find such a deep hospitality at its core has been extraordinary. It is no exaggeration to say that this, alongside my family community, has become a primary community in which I am known, in which I learn, am challenged, am liked and disliked, in which at a domestic level I learn to love and fail and risk again as a Christian. It is the site of significant formation for Christian discipleship, and yet it is also the place in which although the Eucharist is celebrated daily I cannot receive communion. Instead I approach the sanctuary with my arms crossed indicating the desire for a blessing. On a Sunday I go along with my son to my local Catholic parish, with a rich liturgy and large community in which I have little direct involvement and receive the Eucharist surrounded by and large by strangers. This has given me some pause for thought about where spiritual communion lies for me working across denominations in this manner – what are the material signs of being the Body of Christ, a gathered community?

Perhaps I should start by being clear about the gifts that I have received as part of an Anglican gathered community in the absence of being able to receive communion: the experience of receiving a blessing has refreshed in me an immense sense of the power of prayer – the power of these prayers and the power of touch has been an overwhelming source of comfort and grace; and my relationship to the Word, to Scripture has changed too – and it needed to! I have quite literally come to ‘feed’ on the Word. It has taught me in all sorts of

situations to wonder what the Lord really wants me to receive if I can stretch out my hands to ask..

But I want to be equally clear that I have come to believe that there are dangers in pursuing an overly romantic account of spiritual communion through prayer and Scripture. Over time I have come to find this practice harder rather than easier, and it does not find an easy or straightforward place within my own spirituality. Until arriving at Westcott I had largely accepted the account offered by my own church that full Eucharistic communion was not appropriate until the point had been reached of significant agreement between the churches on key theological and ecclesiological questions – the Eucharist needed to express that deep reality not simply the future aspiration of unity. There is a deep and abiding integrity in maintaining a Eucharistic discipline that looks this difficulty in the eyes and maintains its gaze. Our thinking is born and re-born in difficulty not leisure and ease, in the breakdown and tragedy of practice not simply its success. My awareness of the day in day out reality of looking disunity in the face has led me to reflect again on how our approach is read and manifests itself as a practice across divided communities.

I have found this practice of non-reception to be especially challenging in the following ways:

In reality it is immensely difficult to maintain a sense of corporate 'dis-grace' in divided Eucharistic practice and for this not simply to collapse into the burden carried alone by the individual or family and little by the community.

There is a strange reality whereby energy seems to have been lost from the ecumenical process and yet the immediate pastoral needs of those who live in interchurch families, have significant relationships with another denomination or have made a faith journey from one denomination to another feel suggest that progress is now *unforgiveably* slow. Yes, this is a

process that happens in God's time not ours, but what might we do to further God's work of unity as a priority.

What does any of this mean to those who maintain allegiance with a but basically consider themselves 'postdenominational' are refuse to be bound by obedience to a church line? I am increasingly at odds with my peers who have a much altered relationship to church authority and governance processes.

Ealier this year I had a moment when some of these musing crystalised for me: a new student of mine came to see me to ask about my Eucharsitic practice in the community. I have always been clear that I am willing to discuss the fact that I do not receive communion at Westcott with any student. Alison finds it difficult that I do not receive communion, this is partly for theological reasons but it is also that she is troubled by the gesture that I make to signal that I wish for a blessing. To her the sign of 'crossed arms' is a sign of death, this is the sign she uses in the theatre to signal death.

A small section from the liberation theologian of disability, Nancy Eisland, came to me as I thought through this encounter afterwards:

"The body practices of the church are a physical language – the routines, rules and practices of the body, conscious and unconscious. In the church, the body practices are the psychical discourse of inclusion and exclusion. The practices reveal the hidden membership roll, those whose bodies matter in the shaping of liturgies and services."

This enounter with Alison pushed me to consider the visual and embodied sign of non-reception and the reading and interpretation of this sign in communities of difference. It is not enough that I find ways as an individual of receiving spiritually from this community. If spiritual communion is to mean very much to me in my context I need to be able to find

resources to answer the following question: What is the *spirituality* of encounter and reconciliation that underlies spiritual communion? This is a question that surely matters as much within denominations at present as between them. What I am more sure of than ever is that for the church to be *practised* into unity in a new generation will depend more than anything on a willingness of the church to practice into being a *spirituality of encounter and reconciliation*.

Philip Sheldrake, himself a RC who taught Spirituality at Westcott a number of years ago was invited earlier this year by an international group of Anglicans to offer a manifesto for keeping faith with reconciliation in the Anglican Communion. For Sheldrake when we look at the life of individuals or institutions we recognise that the practice of encounter and reconciliation has at its foundation a complex balance between structural change and spiritual harmony. For him the start to a process of reconciliation begins with a basic willingness to rebalance power so that those embarking on a costly conversation are at least equal in dialogue. For him practising reconciliation also means being willing to confront fear and loathing (the tendency to generalise, demonise, colonise, trivialise or simply to ignore) and it is also to resist the temptation when conflict arises to engage in emotionally satisfying superficial action (to detain dissidents, to expel immigrants, to marginalise opponents). Those of us who have been involved in resolving (or perhaps causing) conflicts either at home or in the work place will perhaps relate to these insights, we might even want to add a few of our own to his list. But Sheldrake pushes a deeper question – what is distinctly Christian about costly reconciliation? Reflecting on the image of the cross he stresses that at the heart of costly reconciliation is the search for what he calls rather illusively ‘the mystery of the whole’. For Sheldrake the ‘mystery of the whole’ is most

clearly located in the Eucharist. The search for unity and for the whole is not the search for the missing piece of the jigsaw, the cherry on the pie, in other words what already seems like it is mine and belongs to me but has been irritatingly misplaced and ought to be restored. No, it is the search for the things and the people that remain strange, the things that I cannot simply assimilate but which must be gathered. This is a deep and true desire within us, but it is one that can trouble us deeply. And so I believe that the search for unity, like the Eucharist itself, is grounded in a profoundly receptive movement. God asks that we are prepared first and foremost to receive. To be reconciled to each other, is to be a people continually willing to stretch out our hands to receive as we stand side by side gathered with Christ. This is true hospitality. In this sense, as Sheldrake argues, "Genuine catholicity implies giving space to everything and everyone that God gives space to", this does not lead to a moment of sudden reconciliation and forgiveness this side of the cross when the slate is wiped clean and all is well, but it leads us, as Martin Luther King famously said, to realise that forgiveness and reconciliation are a permanent way of life – they like the church are bodily and visibly *practised* into being. I continue to feel uncomfortable about the controlling and disciplining of bodies in the context of Eucharistic practice and about the sign of closed non-reception that Catholics give which seems at odds with both baptismal and eucharistic symbolic worlds. But beyond this ambivalence I am learning that to experience and be part of a diverse gathered community in Cambridge is, for me, about finding the resources and opportunities to practice such a spirituality of encounter and reconciliation.

"May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me"