

CHRISTIAN DIVERSITY AND CATHOLIC UNITY

The Jubilee Lecture

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My fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, I begin by paying tribute to the work of MSF over the past fifty years. I do this by acknowledging my own debt to your vision and achievement, in the first place as one who has never enrolled himself in the Fellowship, and so, in some ways, speaks as an 'outsider.' I suppose that I have never been a 'joiner' of any group within Methodism, with the single exception of the Methodist Renewal Group in the early sixties, of which (I have to acknowledge it) I was a founder member. The groups which exist, the Methodist Revival Fellowship, Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism, the Alliance of Radical Methodists and so on, all, in their several ways, bear witness to aspects of our church to which, in one way or another, I could offer assent: I too would want to be clear about the need for revival, or the evangelical centralities, or about the radical demands of the Gospel, and have close friends in all these groupings. But it is the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship that stands closest to where I would wish to see the 'great tradition' of our church: I feel myself most a 'catholic' Christian in the Methodist tradition, and for all that I have learnt from the vision and witness of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship I pay my debt of thankfulness, and offer my congratulations on the Jubilee we keep at this present time.

For I am grateful that we Methodists have never lost that sense of being part of the Catholic church. In the *Service for the Public Reception of New Members*, which made me a Methodist member in 1952, the words that made their greatest impression are these (I use the words that we used then):

Within the Christian Church – One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic – the Methodist Church holds and cherishes a true place, having been raised up by God to spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the world.

I was trained for my Methodist discipleship by Donald Lee, himself an exponent of all that MSF has stood for, and I look back on that particular formation with great appreciation. My own ministry has taken me into ministry on the world scale, and now I have an office and a task that makes me think daily, hourly, about the whole world, together with the inestimable privilege of endless ecumenical contact and much travelling in this world. I never cease to be grateful to the tradition delivered to me that I do not belong to what T O Wedel called the 'little church' but to the 'great Church,' not to a sect or merely a denomination, but to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. I am glad that I know in what way I can reply to the question often put to me, 'Are you a Catholic?' The answer is, 'Yes, I am,' and it is the writing and the preaching, the thinking and the praying of very many members of MSF that makes that credible for me. I am profoundly grateful to both the individual and the corporate witness of the members of the Fellowship for this sense of 'Catholicity.'

But the debt lies not only in this broader sphere of doctrine and spirituality, but also in the liturgical achievements wrought by MSF in the fifty years. The great Eucharist we have just celebrated says it all. There is now the proper 'Shape' of the Liturgy set out for all the Methodist people for their nourishing and sustaining, the great means of grace with all the proper marks of 'Catholic' liturgical renewal upon it, and indeed contributing to the wider Catholic liturgical frameworks its own distinctive richnesses. I refer, for example, to the eschatological vision opened up in the 1974 Sunday Service:

Accept us as we offer ourselves to be a living sacrifice and bring us with the whole creation to your heavenly kingdom.

We thank you, Lord, that you have fed us in this sacrament, united us with Christ, and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all mankind.

Those simple phrases are so powerful, and very often they are not present in other great liturgies.

I shall return to the sustaining centrality of the Eucharist in the latter part of what I have to say this afternoon. Just now I record the gratitude of all Methodism (and the 'greater Church') to the liturgical scholars, who have themselves been strengthened and established in this work through their membership of the MSF.

But I come to speak to you as neither a church historian nor as a liturgist, nor as one who is even primarily interested in ecumenism. The mysteries of these great trades I know only at second hand, and indeed much of what those of you who are chiefly concerned with 'faith and order' consider remains for me impenetrably mysterious. I come to shed no light upon 'Lima' or ARCIC, although I must assure myself that these enterprises are vitally necessary if the Church is to be one that the world may believe. No, rather I am by academic profession a missiologist, one seriously concerned about the theology of mission. As such I am a *rara avis*, a rare bird in the British theological aviary, and I guess, therefore, that some of my presuppositions will be unusual to many of you. They will emerge as I go on, but perhaps some sentences may be helpful here.

We have entered a new stage in the history of the Christian Church. I was reading this morning a book by a French archbishop, *La Mission de l'Église*, and he said that, by the year 2000, half the membership of the Roman Catholic Church will live in Latin America, and by that same time the number of Roman Catholic Christians in Africa will outnumber all the Catholic Christians in Western Europe. That is the measure of the change. Although the church does not look anything like as glorious as it did when Methodist scholarship was flourishing, I have to tell you that the church looks great and glorious from where I usually stand, not in the dwindling remnants of a great tradition in our northern European countries, but in the living, vibrant, growing, powerful churches of the world, and we enter into that new age. For we have entered into a new stage in Christian history as a result of the dramatic growth of the world church, the new horizons of religious pluralism, and the ensuing pastoral and theological problems. An American Roman Catholic missiologist describes this:

The well-known intellectual frameworks that shaped Christian theology through the mist of the last two millennia are now suddenly but a few among many. New pastoral and theological problems and issues present themselves in a variety and magnitude bewildering in their number. The

churches in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Oceania are not satisfied to repeat the tradition as it has come to them, in rote fashion. They are anxious to take their place alongside the churches of older origin in contributing their responses to the gospel in the great stream of Christian tradition. They are joined by many communities in the North Atlantic ambit, who are seeking new ways of giving voice to their experience of Christ in a rapidly changing world.

So 'Christian Diversity' is a theme for missiologists, as this professional discipline wrestles with the issue of how a community can be faithful both to its contemporary experience and understanding of the Gospel, and at the same time not lose touch with the historical tradition and the wider Catholicities of the Church. Reflection upon these and such issues belong to the theology of mission, which is far wider in its scope than the questions usually treated by 'faith and order' commissions.

Secondly, the relation of Christian faith to all other forms of faith is the great unsolved theological problem of our time, compared with which internal 'western' debates about religion and science or faith and philosophy are child's play. I have written extensively elsewhere about all that, and mention it here because the Christian faith itself is undergoing various transformations in the light of inter-religious encounter, and the more such encounters there are the more diverse will be the forms of Christian response, and I must touch on all this in what follows. But here again the theologian concerned with mission is vitally interested in 'Christian Diversity' and by implication with 'Catholic Unity.'

The Church in Mission: the New Testament Diversity

Now I want to use some of the material I used in a Devotional Session at the Middlesbrough Conference in 1983, about six 'models' of mission or ministry in the New Testament. Diversity inside the New Testament is apparent, especially when you ask, 'How did the church think that its mission should be carried out?'

So, for example, there are the contrasting churchmanships of Jerusalem and Antioch. The first I called 'Fortress Zion' and the second, 'Frontier Riding.' Another pair of contrasting churchmanships or models of mission is between the 'charismatic enthusiasm' of Corinth and the 'calm Catholicism' of the Pastoral Epistles. And one further contrasted set of models would be between what one might call the 'Law and Order Lobby' of the Letter to the Romans and the Pastoral Epistles and the 'subversive sectarianism' of the book of Revelation and elsewhere. Let me describe these quite diverse patterns inside the New Testament, for they are all forms of mission and response to the context in which the early gospel message was proclaimed.

Fortress Zion

The first picture that we have inside the New Testament, given to us in the Acts of the Apostles and implied in the letters of Saint Paul and elsewhere, is that the church never went out on mission at all. The first model of the mission of the church is Fortress Zion (with its sub-title of 'Hold the fort for I am coming'). The disciples, who have seen the Lord ascend into heaven in that place believe that he will come again in that place, and so they are daily in the Temple praying. They live in the context of the Jewish religion. They have not ceased to be Jews. They are worshippers

in the Temple. Even at the end of the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul returns from his journeys, he goes to the chiefs of the church and they go to the Temple to offer sacrifices. There they are. They have not heeded any command, if ever there was a command, to go into all the world. They have stayed in Jerusalem, and there they stay, believing that any moment now the Lord will return. They wait and they expect. They hope and they long that the uncompleted business of being the Lord's Messiah will take place in their lifetime, in that place. Their idea of mission is the ancient Jewish notion, that you have in the Psalms, in the book of Zechariah and in Isaiah, that the nations will flow up to Jerusalem, that mission will be carried out simply by standing in one place.

Is that what the Methodists of our churches up and down this country believe? If you keep the chapel going, one day they are all going to flow back into these nineteenth century buildings of ours. One day, as long as we are faithful, the Lord will return and everything will be all right. Certainly we have lots and lots of chapels called Zion, and there are people who are well aware of the significance of Zion. They believe that, if you are faithful and you wait, the Lord will come to you. Meanwhile, make the Lord's house as beautiful as it can be, so that when he does come, he will find a people prepared.

Frontier Riding

The contrast with that is the extraordinary mission and churchmanship of the church in Antioch (with its sub-title 'Go north-west, young man'). There, in Antioch, the great inconceivable miracle took place. We do not know the man, the unknown genius, who was first able to speak to the Hellenistic mind about the Saviourship of Jesus, without using the category of Messianic expectation. Who was it who was able to speak of Jesus as Saviour and Deliverer outside the synagogue, so that the Greeks flowed into the church in Antioch? That's quite an extraordinary thing. Back there in Fortress Zion they said, 'How can this thing be?' Word got to them that there had been this outbreak of a new form of Christianity, whose followers were not identified as followers of the Way, but as Christians (*christianoï*). 'In Antioch they were first called Christians.' The Latin form of the word indicates that it was the Romans who identified them as followers of a Christus. It was not a Jewish sect any more. All sorts of things were going on, and so the Jerusalem Church sent Missions Inspector Barnabas to Antioch to see what was happening, and he could report only favourably on what he saw.

Because it was a new form of Christianity, quite extraordinary in its power, they sent for a theologian of mission. They sent for Saul, who was in Tarsus at that time, and after a time they said, 'This can happen anywhere,' and so the missionary journeys (which have been so tedious to so many generations of O Level RE students) began. Those missionary journeys were what I call 'Frontier Riding,' and that is part of our tradition too. Today there are sixty million Methodists in the United States of America because our friends and forebears rode with the people who rode west. New forms of Christianity were developing, and very strange they must have seemed to the people back in Zion. So you have that instantaneous diversity, which is what the letters of Paul are all about. Two forms of Christianity, two forms of mission. It is quite clear that Paul sees the collection for the church in Jerusalem as the healing of that breach. Luke writes about it as the alms collection, for the poor of Jerusalem, but for Saint Paul it is *koinonia*, it is fellowship, it is a way of uniting two divergent forms of

Christianity.

I look at the whole spectrum of the world church, and I see those who are still there in Zion, keeping the thing going, waiting for the massive return, and those who are out there on the frontiers, the frontier riders. 'Go north-west, young man. Paul. Barnabas. All you others. Go north-west.' Well, that is a contrast and you cannot have both. There is a way of holding them together in unity and love, and that is what Paul was exploring, but Zion mission is different from frontier mission.

Charismatic Enthusiasm

Now when the church expands in this extraordinary way it immediately produces the most extraordinary effects. Let us take the church at Corinth. I am deeply fascinated by Paul at Ephesus, where he stayed for two years, and I am very interested in Paul's Ephesian ministry, but I have a certain fellow-feeling for Paul every time the boat came in from Corinth. 'What have they done now?' Every time! 'I hear that there are divisions among you.' 'I hear that there is sexual immorality among you.' 'I hear that, when you celebrate the eucharist, the poor are at this end and the rich are at that end, and you do not discern the Body of Christ.' 'I hear that there are people among you who are actually saying that they are Christians, but they do not believe in the Resurrection.' All this and more, which we find in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, is the clue to Saint Paul. The question about apostleship. How people's strengths are made perfect in weakness. The argument about the outbreaks in Corinth of Corybantic ecstasy, speaking with tongues, healing miracles. Paul said it was not good because it did not help mission along very much. If an outsider came he would not be edified by such behaviour. So it was not a good thing. On the other hand, Paul seems to have invented a special word for the quality of what a Christian is, for these Corinthians and for himself, namely the word charismatic, or he invents the term charismata. Grace gifts. Tom Smaile says about these things that he identifies in 1 Corinthians 12, the gifts of the congregation, that they are 'not just human talents dedicated to Christ,' but 'the gracious giving of new possibilities to our renewed humanity ... they are gifts of the Spirit because they do what dedicated human talents by themselves could never do; they have transcendent reference and they reveal the power and presence of the ascended Lord.'

I believe that every congregation living out there on the frontier is going to receive the gifts of the Spirit, or it is not a Christian congregation. Gifts of the Spirit and charismatic enthusiasms belong to our tradition, too.

Calm Catholicism

In contrast to charismatic enthusiasm, by the time you get to the Pastoral Epistles you have what is called, I think mistakenly, early Catholicism. Calmly catholic they are, but it is not that, as James Dunn (a Methodist scholar of great power) says in 'Jesus and the Spirit,' 'When you get to the Pastoral Epistles there is no place for the Spirit.' The Spirit becomes a kind of counter that safeguards the tradition, but things are done decently and in order. Faith has become 'The Faith.' 'Sound words' is what is traditioned. The tradition is of sound words and pure doctrine. There is a pure ministry. Things have calmed down. In the Pastoral Epistles there are no outbreaks of ecstasy and enthusiasm. That is called early Catholicism in the books, but I offer it as a choice over against charismatic enthusiasm.

Law and Order or Subversive Sectarianism

The third pair that I want to look at for a moment is the church/state relationship inside the New Testament. There lies, within the pages of the New Testament, the glaring contrast between Revelation 13 and Romans 13 and similar passages in 1 Timothy 2.1 - 2 and 1 Peter 2.13 - 14. Jesus was put to death for political agitation by a Roman Governor whose name is known for all time. How could it so easily be said that the ruler is 'God's servant, an agent of justice to bring punishment to the wrong-doer'? How, when the fires of persecution had already broken out on some Christians, could Paul write, 'Be subject to the Emperor. All authority is given by God'?

Then there is the radical contrast in Revelation 13, where the beast rises from the sea, and the beast is the Roman Empire. The dragon, Satan, is demonic. Even to tell the story of Jesus is itself a form of subversion. A meditation upon a man who stands before Pilate and says, 'My kingdom is not of this world' is to see a man here exhibiting a different power style. John is also portraying a confrontation with the State, even though it be a confrontation through silence. Now that pair of contrasts is also Christian diversity.

I want to say to you that I believe that Catholic Christianity, the Christianity I want to celebrate, belongs on the frontier, is about charismatic enthusiasm and is actually politically subversive. You can have a wide range of choice if you play with permutations. Maybe you would like to choose Zion and all things done decently and in order and be subject to the Lord as supreme. But it does not have to be that direct contrast. You can be conservative liturgically and radical politically. But you cannot live in Zion and roam the northwest frontiers. You cannot have everything done decently and in order and give reign to the free charismatic gifts. You cannot pray for the Emperor and at the same time plot his subversion. Here I make my own choices and I affirm that I'm for frontier riding, the church out there on the boundaries, always pressing out on those boundaries, not at home in Zion, not at home in Geneva, not at home in Rome, not at home in the Moscow Patriarchate, but the church out there on the frontiers; and the church enthusiastic, the church charismatic (in the way in which I defined it), and the church as politically subversive.

Catholic Diversity and Christian Unity

Altering the title of the lecture, I have called this section Catholic Diversity and Christian Unity. Catholic Diversity. I am quite utterly fascinated by my experiences on the frontier in many places. This time last year is very vivid to me, because I was in India with people in Bangalore. The anniversary we celebrated was on 31 October, the day of the assassination of Mrs Gandhi, and I was scheduled to attend mass with our missionaries there, Eric Lott and his wife Christine. We were to go to mass that evening in the national liturgical catechetical biblical centre in Bangalore. Now ever since 1974 that liturgical centre has been exploring on the frontiers what an Indian liturgy is. Here's a description of it:

The welcome of the celebrant is completely Indian. Insofar as possible, the participants wash their hands and feet before entering. They and the priests get a coloured mark on the forehead, and offerings are brought along. People exchange greetings Indian fashion. The priest's greeting to the community is striking:

Fullness there, fullness here, from fullness comes fullness.
Once fullness has come from fullness, there is fullness.

(Only it is in Sanskrit.)

This is followed by a purification ceremony. Water, placed on a low table, is blessed in Indian fashion. Various prayers can be said as the priest sprinkles the faithful. One beautiful prayer goes as follows:

You, whose eyes nothing escapes,
You, who rule over the whole world,
You, who sustain the whole universe,
Fill this place of worship with your presence.

The priest then washes his hands in the water and sips it three times from his hand. This is followed by a kind of penitential rite, and then by the lighting of a large oil lamp. In India light is one of the major symbols for God, and so prayers of praise for light take many different forms:

Eternal light, shining far out in the heavens,
Glittering sun, shedding light in all directions –
above, below, and in between,
True light, enlightening every human who comes into this world,
drive out the darkness from our hearts
and lighten us with the glow of your glory.

(It is very Sanskritic, very Hindu, very questionable, and there are many Indian Catholic Christians who do not like this frontier riding, this change.)

Many typically Indian gestures are also evident during the readings. For example, the people place their hands on their knees, palms upward. After a reading from the sacred books of India, the well-known saying is uttered:

From the unreal lead me to the real,
From darkness lead me to the light,
From death lead me to deathlessness.

(Incidentally, the Methodist baptismal service uses that same Upanishadic prayer.)

This is followed by readings from the Old Testament, an apostolic letter, and the Gospels.

The preparation for the Eucharistic gifts begins with the presentation of symbolic gifts: e.g., flowers, gifts for the poor, bread and wine, and a plate with eight flowers on it. The celebrant places them on a low table and invites the faithful to formulate their intentions. Then he makes a ceremonial gesture with the plate and the eight flowers in eight directions.

How strange! Is that not syncretism? Can you do that? Or do you, as I have read it to you, find a kind of surpassing beauty in it? I did. I saw it. But it is actually very much frowned upon by the western catholic tradition in India. This is frontier riding that is not acceptable.

Now let us turn to another place altogether. I wonder if, at any time, you have had your attention drawn to what I think ought to be *the* best seller, but most people do not know it. It is so beautiful. It is called *Christianity rediscovered* by Vincent Donovan.

He is a Holy Ghost Father, working among the Masai people. Now Catholic missions, like Methodist missions, all over the world have imposed things on people, and so you have hundreds of nominal Catholics who went to Catholic schools or Catholic hospitals, but everyone knows that the inner heart of the African person has not been touched. Donovan, of that great missionary order of the Holy Ghost Fathers of Ireland and America, said to his bishop, 'Let me start all over again. Let me just go and talk to these people about God,' and he describes the perplexity of these Masai warriors as he arrives and says, 'I want to talk to you about God.' They all say to each other, 'Here's a man come who wants to talk to us about God. Nobody has ever wanted to talk to us about God before. They have usually wanted to impose their understanding of God upon us.'

This most beautiful book, which has the sub-title *An epistle from the Masai*, tells us this sort of thing:

I used to look forward to evening Mass in Ole Sikii's village. It began when I drove my Landrover up to his village. The cows were just returning with their tired and parched herders. Children swarmed all over me with their heads bowed low in the typical gesture of a young Masai person greeting an adult. They waited to be touched on the top of the head, and if you did not do it, they kept butting you gently until you did. Elders left their work of standing at the various gates, supervising the return of the cows, assuring themselves that each cow, by name not by number, had returned safely, greeted me and went back to their work. Mothers, scattered throughout the village near all their houses had already begun the milking of the returned cows, but they heard you come in.

In every house in the village, the consciousness of the evening Mass had penetrated to some extent. In varying degrees, everyone in the village was thinking of the Mass, was turning towards the Mass, in a sense was already participating in the Mass, because it began when I drove in. Or long before. It was a strange kind of Mass. No church building, not even any special, fixed spot where it took place. As a matter of fact it moved around all over the village. It started in the spot where several elders had lighted a fire from two sticks of wood, even before I arrived.

An important act, on my part, before I entered the village, was to stoop down, scoop up a handful of grass, and present it to the first elders who greeted me. Grass was another sacred sign among the Masai, like spittle. Since their cattle, and they themselves, lived off grass, it was a vital and a holy sign to them, a sign of peace and happiness and well-being.

During stormy and angry arguments that might arise in their lives, a tuft of grass, offered by one Masai and accepted by the second, was an assurance that no violence would erupt because of the differences and arguments. No Masai would violate that sacred sign of peace offered, because it was not only a *sign* of peace; it *was* peace. Just as spittle was forgiveness. Such was the sacramental system of the Masai.

So, as the Mass began, I picked up a tuft of grass and passed it on to the first elder who met me, and greeted him with 'the peace of Christ.' He accepted it and passed it on to neighbouring elders and their families. It had to pass all through the village.

So he goes on, but there is one more sentence I must read to you. ‘Sometimes the tuft of grass did not return to me and then there was no Mass that day, for there was no forgiveness in that community.’ Now I find that kind of story of African Christians, Catholic Christians, of the same faith as me, of their insights, brings all sorts of new reverberations.

The last figure I want to talk about, and you will see that I have deliberately used the Roman Catholic situation in place after place, is the great Roman Catholic scholar of Sri Lanka, Tissa Balasuriya. He wrote a book called *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*. There is a catholic theologian in the slums of Colombo, seeing precisely that every time you break this bread and you share it you are making a political declaration about the world. The bread which is broken. The bread that is the healing. He makes that declaration in such a way, through the Eucharist, through his preaching and through the life of that community in Colombo, which I have seen, that atheist trade unionists are also part of that Eucharist, because they say, ‘That’s what we understand.’ So too are Buddhist monks, who come to him and say, ‘We understand enough of what this is for us to say we would like to be part of this.’ So you have this extraordinary Eucharist for human liberation, with these participating people, who are declared atheists and Buddhists, but perceiving something.

Now those three pictures are about the constructing of local theologies in this enormous diversity of the Roman Catholic Church. When we add the Protestant churches of the world to this, the Anglican churches and the Orthodox churches, as they ride out on the frontiers, the diversity is just mind-blowing, and it is Catholic diversity.

I was once asked, in my theological education, to ponder this: If one of my Anglo-Saxon forebears from twelve hundred years ago suddenly stepped out of a time warp and was present in our midst, what conceivably could he understand, until there came a moment in this place where some bread was broken and some wine poured out? Then he would say, ‘Ah yes. This is my community.’

As I move around the world I kind of step out of a time warp in Africa or in India or in Burma. I sat through the Burmese Methodist Conference last year. Something was wrong with the accounts and nobody could understand what was going on, but as it was in Burmese I had an excuse for not understanding anything. But then, suddenly, there is the bread that is broken and the wine poured out, and these visible words, that are at the heart of catholicity for me, are about that union that we have. Catholic diversity – that we may expect to grow and grow, and you and I are going to move into this new age that will give some church historians and some liturgists the shudders, but these things are where we are called to go. Frontier riding. Diversity upon diversity, and we are not to be frightened of it. The myth that I was pointing to when I spoke about the New Testament was that there ever was one New Testament form of Christianity. There never was so. But what is it that holds us and sustains us? For me it is where I began – catholicity, that sense that it is with the whole community, the whole Body of Christ, that I break that bread, pour that wine. I do this in remembrance of one who taught like that, who died on that cross, and is risen again. That is Christian unity – Christian Diversity and Catholic Unity.

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