Archbishop's address at 50th anniversary of PCPCU

Wednesday 17th November 2010

An address given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, at a conference to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Sala Pio X, Vatican City, 17 November 2010.

The Archbishop's address followed one given by Cardinal Walter Kasper and was followed by one by Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon (Ecumenical Patriarchate). The theme of the conference was "Towards a new stage of ecumenical dialogue".

The full text of the Archbishop's address follows:

We have already been reminded this afternoon that the calling of the Pontifical Council is not primarily one of ecclesiastical diplomacy. Its task is not solely, not even primarily, one of negotiation. The Council has always been and it still is—very valuably—a place where the very idea of unity can be thought about. And one proper hope for this celebration is that time should be given to thinking about the very notion of unity as a *theological* concept. That work has already been sketched this afternoon and in other discussions at the plenary meeting of the Council. What I hope to do in the first part of my remarks this afternoon is to say a few words outlining what I believe to be the biblical foundations for a theology of Christian unity. I hope then to draw out some of the implications for the practice of the Church of such a theology, and then to relate it to the very specific challenges that our ecumenical dialogues face at the present moment.

1 Biblical foundations for a theology of Christian unity

I wish to suggest that the New Testament provides us with at least three dimensions for understanding the unity that God desires. These dimensions appear with different emphasis in diverse passages of the New Testament. But I believe that they are powerfully coherent and that together they give us a vision not simply of ecclesiology in a restricted sense, but indeed of Christian anthropology: that is, a view of what is the destiny of humankind in the purposes of God, and therefore the destiny God intends for the world God has made.

And the first dimension of unity as the New Testament presents it is very clearly and very simply unity in Jesus Christ with God the Father. Unity is first and foremost being in Christ through the Spirit. It is the unity of the very life of God; the unity in relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. It is unity with the mind of God, and with the works of God. In St John's Gospel chapter 6 we read of 'doing the works of God'. In the second letter of Peter we read of 'participation in the divine nature' – the text which lies at the root of all Christian reflection on the subject of *theosis,* divinisation. We read in the New Testament of praying the prayer of Christ 'Abba, Father' in the Spirit. Our Lord speaks again in the Fourth Gospel about drawing his disciples 'to be where he is'. St Paul speaks of our 'having the mind of Christ'. They are the themes that run throughout the Farewell Discourses in St John's Gospel, and which dominate for example the sixth chapter of Romans, the second and third chapters of 2 Corinthians and the first chapter of Ephesians. Those are only a few references among many.

That is the dimension of unity that is primary and that determines everything else we should say about unity: the unity that shapes everything else is unity in the work, and the prayer, and the mind of Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is on the basis of that common gift through the Spirit, the gift of being made the adoptive children of God, that we move into understanding the second dimension of unity in the New Testament, and that is unity with one another in the body of Christ. It is a dimension in which we recognise the *mutuality* of the gifts of the Spirit: the fact that every gift the Spirit gives is for *communion*. It is the recognition of one another's standing in Christ, our place, our belonging. It is the love of the brothers and sisters. This too is a theme of the Farewell Discourses in St John's Gospel and very particularly the fifteenth chapter of John. It runs through the epistles of John, and in St Paul's letters it dominates the discussion of Romans 12—15, 1 Corinthians 11—14, 2 Corinthians 8 and once again the first chapter of Ephesians and the second chapter of Philippians. As that second chapter of Philippians makes plain, to have the mind of Christ is to be emptied of self-concern, to be emptied of self-concern, and into the fullness of the life of the body which is love of the community; and love of the community is the freedom both to give and to receive what we have received through Christ in his incarnation, death and resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

But, as I have just said, these are gifts received in a very specific way through the incarnation, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And they are therefore gifts which come alive *for* us and *in* us by a third kind of unity: that is, by means of unity with the witness of the apostles. In the New Testament the apostles are witnesses of the resurrection, charged with the good news of the risen Jesus, given the power and the unity to communicate that good news so that lives are transformed in the Holy Spirit. And so unity with apostolic teaching and apostolic witness is a natural consequence of understanding unity as unity *in* Christ. Again it is a theme that emerges in different places in the New Testament: Romans 15 touches on this matter, as do the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 15 especially St Paul speaks very directly of the need to hold to what has been received from the apostolic witness to resurrection. It is the theme of 2 Corinthians 10—13, and of the whole of Galatians where Paul (as you will remember) says that 'if an angel out of heaven gives you another gospel', they are to ignore it' (1.8). It is found in Colossians 2 and 1 Thessalonians 2 and of course it dominates much of the discussion of the Pastoral Epistles.

Three biblical dimensions of unity: first, unity *in Christ*, unity with the prayer of Christ, the action of Christ. Second, unity *with one another*, a dynamic not a static unity, because it is a unity which constantly builds up human lives in holiness by the exchange of gift, grace and wisdom. And third, unity *with the apostolic witness*, a proclamation of the resurrection of *this man* Jesus Christ, in whom the history of the world is transformed.

2 Implications for the practice of the Church

If we begin with such a threefold understanding of unity, what are the practical implications for the visible life of Christ's Church? Taking them one by one I believe these implications are something like this: first of all, the visible concrete life of the Church must be a life that expresses and realises our standing in Christ. The visible life of the Church must declare *this is where we stand*: this is how we pray, this is the life that lives in us – the life of communion in the Holy Trinity. Hence the centrality of the Holy Eucharist as the place where supremely we stand in and with Christ and are renewed in his life. The Holy Eucharist is the place where, above all, the prayer of Christ becomes *our* prayer, and the life of Christ becomes *our* life in the sacramental tokens of his body and blood. But also if the Church is called to express and realise our standing in Christ, then the visible life of the Church must also show forth a

pedagogy of prayer that roots us one by one and day by day in Christ's own praying. A church which is serious about unity with Christ, is a church which is devoted to growing and nourishing that life of prayer which is Christ's life in us. And the twin priorities of the Eucharist and life of contemplative holiness that roots us in the prayer of Christ are the foremost ways in which the Church in its visible life declares where it stands, with whom it is united, and in whom it lives.

Secondly, the visible life of the Church must express and realise mutual service. It must be marked by our availability to one another. To be available for one another's sanctification is part of the essence of that communion which is the Church's life. And being available for one another's sanctification is of course—at the same time—to be there for the sharing of this loving communion with all believers or non-believers through our work and service in the world.

So, from the centrality of the Eucharist and contemplative prayer grows the reality of mutual service and outward-facing service: being available, united with one another in the dynamic of giving to *one another*, and united with one another in the presentation of hope to the *whole world*.

And thirdly the visible life of the Church must express and realise continuity with the apostolic testimony with the witness to the cross and resurrection. It does this through a ministry in the Church that is (a) recognisable throughout all communities of belief, and (b) is held to account for its transmission of the apostolic truth by the agreed doctrinal discernment of the whole body. To stand in Christ (point one), to be committed to mutual service (point two), is to stand daily in need of the apostolic witness to resurrection; and the existence of ordained ministry and the sacramental scheme of worship animated by that ministry is to be accountable for apostolic truth. It is to recognise that there must be *one* proclamation of Christ crucified and risen and not different and optional versions of that story.

In relation then to the actual work of ecumenical dialogue and the hopes we have for it. The first of the points I made is very closely bound up indeed with what we have to say with and to one another about baptism (and I echo here some of the things that His Eminence Cardinal Kasper has already said this afternoon). Baptism understood as our sacramental entry into the life of Christ, our stepping into the place of Christ, is the foundation of both how we talk about and how we realise our standing in Christ by unity within the life of the Trinity. It is bound up closely and intimately with that entire agenda of spiritual ecumenism about which Cardinal Kasper has spoken so eloquently already: the shared search for holiness. But it spills over into the second area; it is what leads us into *koinonia,* the common life of mutual service. In terms of formal relations between the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches this is the territory in which our episcopal (the International Anglican Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission) has worked. It's very particularly the responsibility of *bishops* working together, because a bishop's task is pre-eminently both the nourishing within the body of a life of mutual gift and the shared work of holiness, and the missionary presentation of this life and work to the world as transforming and transfiguring hope.

But the third area is of course where most of our most intractable difficulties arise, because we have not been able to recognise one another's ministries of hope. We debate (sometimes in history if not now) quite fiercely about what counts as fundamental in our theology of ministry. We disagree over how the apostolic witness is secured in its transmission. And the disagreements between the Orthodox, Reformed, Roman Catholic and Anglican Christians over the exact status of the need for communion with the see of Peter and Paul, and over the degree of authority of the bishop of that Apostolic See to determine the bounds of teaching and practice, is one of the most acute and complex areas of this third territory with which we have to deal.

Thus it is quite tempting to say that the first and second areas of concern are the ones that really matter and that the third has to be relegated to the 'too difficult' pile of material. But I don't believe that that will do as an agenda or a hope for ecumenical dialogue: I don't believe that it is finally possible to separate the first two points about unity from the third. Even if various churches and Christian communities in dialogue differ about what has to be regarded as essential in the theology of ordained ministry nonetheless there is work to be done. There is work that has been done, with profit and with learning. A very substantial agreement in ARCIC about the theology of ministry and sacraments—despite all subsequent difficulties—remains for many of us a point of orientation and a sign of hope. It is still worth having the discussion about that third area not least because ultimately it is not separable from the other two. If we want to know that it is *Christ* we are talking about, in his death and resurrection, the question of unity with the apostolic witness is not a matter of indifference. So it is worth continuing the discussion about the nature of ordained ministry and it is equally worth continuing the discussion for an ongoing discernment about the actual and potential ministry of the Apostolic See of the West, the see of Rome. That has to be pursued with greater energy, because if we are serious about the first and second points, when we find ourselves standing in Christ in *different* places or try to serve one another's sanctification *without* the visible bond of communion, we are in a very strange and rather anomalous position.

Now of course we are here in the territory of theological conscience. There are good theological reasons why some communions find it difficult to recognise fully the ordained ministry of others. There are difficulties that are grounded in theological conscience about recognising the unique charism of the see of Rome, particularly as defined in *Pastore aeternus*. But however deep those conscientious grounds of theological difference, those who hold them are bound to be conscious of living in an anomaly, and one apparently to be sustained indefinitely in the life of the Church called to be *visibly one* in the one Lord, *visibly one* with his one prayer to the Father, *visibly one* in the common search for holiness. To remain in such an anomalous position without some self-searching or self-questioning theological work, is not defensible. We have to explain how and why such-and-such a principle is *so* basic that it effects the integrity of our understanding of being in Christand serving each other's sanctification.

But if I am right about this it constitutes a challenge and an agenda equally for the Reformed and the Catholic Christian. But I believe that the history of the Pontifical Council has always been one in which scholars and thinkers have not been afraid to put challenges to both Reformed and Catholic thinkers.

3 Challenges that our ecumenical dialogues face at the present moment

In the near future of ecumenical dialogue I believe that a more robust assertion of what it is we recognise when we recognise each other's *baptism* will be of great significance. To recognise one another's baptism is not to recognise the mechanical validity of some action: it is to recognise *being in Christ*. And if that is what we are recognising we need to work quite hard with those implications.

Likewise I believe that our understanding of my first point concerning shared unity with the *prayer* of Christ will be materially strengthened by what I know has been discussed in the Pontifical Council's plenary, the idea of a shared commentary on the Lord's Prayer: that is, a shared and ecumenical reflection with some claims to the normative standing with which we are all involved. The idea has also been suggested that a shared commentary on the Apostles' Creed would be a desirable outcome of the work of the Pontifical Council. I would agree that this is important work but would simply add at the shared work done by the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission on the Nicene Creed some 20 to 30 years ago issuing the document *The Apostolic Faith Today* is a resource of great

importance here which I hope will feed into any future work on common understanding of the common creeds.

But, in conclusion, I should like to suggest that there are really two focal points for ecumenical theology in the next generation. This is a bold claim which many may dispute. Many may identify other points of greater significance but I've been invited here to contribute to a discussion and this is what I would like to contribute.

First, is should like to see some attempt to work—as we say, 'across the board'—on *eucharistic theology*. I should like to see not simply bi-lateral dialogues in which eucharistic theology figures but some attempt to 'harvest the fruits' in terms of a shared discussion of eucharistic theology across a number of confessional groups. I say this obviously because of a belief which I've already mentioned that our standing in Christ is most fully and effectively realised in the Holy Eucharist. But I say it also because there are many varieties of Christian practice spreading in the world at present in which eucharistic practice is not obviously central, and eucharistic theology is very thin. There are parts of my own Communion and other historic communities of the Reformation in which eucharistic theology seems to have slipped away from a prime position. We therefore, I believe, urgently need common work on the Eucharist. We need to remind ourselves as a Christian family across the globe of why and how it is that the Eucharist shapes where we are as Christians, and defines who we are as Church. We need to understand better why it is that some apparently very popular forms of Christianity do not seem to find the Eucharist central to their practice. We need to discover why this is and to engage; and I would say also that we need to share something of the wisdom that God has given us.

As part of such a reflection, maybe the Pontifical Council should consider a working group that draws representatives from both the historic communions and the newer churches across the world for a different kind of conversation from some of those we have been involved in so far. Perhaps that will be a necessary development if we are to clarify with full theological integrity what unity means.

And the second focal point is that the agenda of *Ut Unum Sint* must not be allowed to slip out of sight. There are many historic sensitivities about the cultural expression of the petrine ministry and indeed about the theological expression of its authority in the modern period. But these should not be allowed to obscure the need to clarify what is the service that can and should be given to an apostolic church by the petrine ministry? The petrine ministry when it is fully itself is, I believe, a ministry of witness to the apostolic heritage: a ministry quite simply of witness to the resurrection. As the Lord says to Peter in St Luke's gospel, 'when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers'. What is the nature of service we expect from a petrine ministry across the Christian confessions today? Why might that matter for a vital, living, and communicating Christian unity?

I believe that by helping us clarifying matters like *that* the Pontifical Council continues to play a vital role, not least in its capacity to engage fellow Christians from across the whole spectrum of Christian diversity. Because the Pontifical Council is able to take up some of these profound and searching theological questions it is never going to let the rest of us get away with the idea that (to use a phrase which I know has been discussed in the plenary) 'reconciled diversity' is all we need. And I think that is an important and critical point for all Christians confessions to listen to, precisely because of the centrality of our unity with the prayer of Christ and what that means.

So we, your fellow workers and friends in other Christian confessions, give thanks for the capacity of the Pontifical Council to work in this vein and we pray for the continuance of that service, that ministry to Christ's body. © Rowan Williams 2010