

CATHOLIC-METHODIST DIALOGUE.

The World Methodist Council met in Seoul, South Korea, at the end of July. At it two events of ecumenical importance occurred. The first was the Council's affirmation of the Joint Declaration on Justification, originally signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999.

This means that Methodists accept the significance of the statement as an expression of the 'shared biblical faith of the Universal Church'. It means that Methodists, along with Lutherans and Catholics no longer see the understanding of justification as a 'church-dividing issue'. In the eighteenth century, Wesley said that few had understood justification as well as Luther but that he had also failed to understand the importance of sanctification. Conversely, Wesley believed that Catholics well understood the need for sanctification, 'pressing on to full salvation' as he was fond of putting it, but that they also failed to understand the biblical teaching on justification.

Methodists now accept that the issues that worried Wesley in regard to the teaching of these two communions have now been laid to rest. The Methodist affirmation sets an important ecumenical precedent for the possible future reception by 'third party' churches as it were of fruitful dialogues between other partners.

At the same conference, the eighth report of the international Roman Catholic-Methodist International Commission was also unanimously received. Potentially, if properly received by the two churches concerned, it represents a very significant step forward in the Catholic-Methodist relationship.

The Roman Catholic-Methodist international dialogue began in 1967, at about the same time as ARCIC. Sadly, it has received less attention than it deserves both within the Catholic and Methodist churches and the rest of the oikoumene. Throughout, a fine balance has been maintained between a clear acceptance on both sides that the goal is and must be full communion in faith a sacramental life and mission and an acceptance that, despite growing mutual esteem and very real convergence on some issues, there remain others that continue to be problematic. One such issue is that of women's presbyteral and episcopal ministry where the fifth report, *The Apostolic Tradition*, made it quite clear that Methodists were of one mind on the issue and the Catholic Church of another. Realism, however, is balanced by the conviction that we are called to continue the dialogue with faith in Christ's promise that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth, even if, at this stage, we cannot see how some of the remaining problems may be resolved. In the meantime, and this is the particular emphasis of the most recent report, there is much learn from each other, a lot that we can give to and receive from each other because, as the present report makes so clear at the beginning, we recognise in each other that which is of Christ and the Gospel and, thus of necessity of the Church.

The seven previous reports were concerned to show Catholics and Methodists how much of the core of Christian faith they held in common, much more than most of them would have realised in previous eras. They were concerned to help the two churches understand each other, that being particularly the case with the seventh report (2001) *Speaking the Truth in Love*, which dealt with the exercise of teaching authority in the two churches. The approach of the present report is to help the two churches become more aware of the spiritual gifts and riches of each other in order that there may be that exchange of gifts between them which

was first implied in the *Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican II and then forcefully underlined by the late John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint*. A vital part of the context of this report is the current rediscovery of the emphasis upon spiritual ecumenism that was so strong in such pioneers of the Ecumenical Movement as Paul Couturier. Another is the emphasis upon the reconciliation of memories and the need for a re-reading both of our common history, the first fifteen centuries, and of the later period in which the Catholic and Methodist churches existed separately. A key related feature of the report is the very extensive interweaving of quotations from key contemporary Catholic and Methodist sources, prominent amongst which are the *Decree on Ecumenism*, *Ut Unum Sint*, *Through Divine Love* (the most recent report of the Roman Catholic-United Methodist dialogue in the States), the *Book of Discipline*¹, and the most recent ecclesiological statement of the British Methodist Conference, *Called To Love and Praise*. This shows Catholics and Methodists seeking to learn from each others' distilled wisdom as witnessed in authoritative teaching.

The present report is entitled *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church*. It begins, as recent ones have done, with a biblical passage, Paul's greeting to the Church at Corinth in his first letter (1 Cor 1:1-10), which, as the Commission states, 'resonates with our experience' since it is an appeal to 'be united in the same mind and the same purpose'. It is then divided into four chapters.

The first, entitled *Mutual Reassessment*, deals with the way in which Methodists and Catholics over more than a couple of centuries have understood and evaluated each other. For much of that time, mutual attitudes were largely, though not wholly, ill-informed and prejudiced, Methodists misunderstanding much of Catholic teaching on the veneration of the saints and Mary, Catholics believing that Methodists were just one more fissiparous Protestant sect. Occasionally, there were flashes of real appreciation of the other as when Newman remarked, in 1850, that Wesley had the qualities that 'make up the notion of a Catholic saint'. Since Vatican II, however, there has been a radical change of attitudes, Catholics now being able to see that the Methodist Movement was characterised by a desire to make known the love of Christ, to reform the inner life of the Church, to encourage participation in the celebration of the eucharist, to serve the poor, to impassion professed Christians into articulate witness for Christ's sake'. Equally, Methodists have come to recognise the importance of the Catholic witness to unity as essential to the Church's mission. They have come to appreciate the Catholic emphasis upon continuity across time and to recover Wesley's own deep appreciation of the holiness of so many Catholic saints, a view that he continued to hold despite his many attacks on aspects of Catholic faith and practice. Finally, both sides have come, in the words of the Commission and in the general context of the Ecumenical Movement, to realise that 'separated Christian communities must eventually grow toward one another if they are to grow closer to Christ. They are formed by the Spirit to be one and not divided'.

Like much else in the report, this first chapter has an importance beyond purely Catholic-Methodist relationships in that it demonstrates the importance of the reconciliation of memories of a common re-reading of the history of separated Christians in order to come to a new appreciation of how ecumenical partners have been formed and how they now need to be positively re-evaluated in the common process of growing together in Christ.

¹ The *Book of Discipline* contains the canon law of the United Methodist Church of USA. It is, however, more than a compendium of regulations since it continues to contain much of the spiritual advice given by Wesley to his 'assistants', the early Methodist preachers.

The second chapter, entitled *Together in Christ*, deals with the common understanding of Church that has developed as a result of the earlier stages of the dialogue. It begins with an emphasis upon the Church as both visible reality and invisible mystery. 'Its visibility is essential to its nature and mission. But...only the eye of faith can discern its deepest reality, its invisible mystery'.

This chapter illuminates both the ecclesiological convergence that has taken place within the general context of the developing ecclesiological consensus within the Ecumenical Movement as a whole and the identification of themes that are particularly, though certainly not exclusively, common to the two partners, the most obvious being the *connectional* nature of the Church². In particular, the work of the fourth and fifth quinquennia of the dialogue, *Towards A Statement on the Church* and *The Apostolic Tradition* is harvested and there are the emphases on the trinitarian basis of ecclesiology and on *koinonia* that one would expect. There is a detailed examination of the common missionary emphasis of both churches in the section entitled *Sharing the Divine Mission* which recalls 'our common understanding of graced cooperation' and participation in God's work, which allows us with St Paul to call Christians 'God's co-workers'.

Paragraphs 60-1 and 85 are especially significant in this context. Para 60 stresses that 'The Church is by nature a connectional society', 'a web of interactive relationships. Both Methodists and Catholics have an essentially 'connectional understanding of Christ's call to discipleship, to holiness and to mission...This connectional principle derives from the understanding of holiness common to Catholics and Methodists: holiness is never a private affair, but a call to perfect love of God³ and of one another'.

Para 61 states 'The dynamic of communion belongs not only to local disciples gathered together in community, but also to the world-wide community of those local communities united together as one Church, the Body of Christ. The Church of Christ is truly present in and effective in some way in all local congregations of the faithful who are gathered together by the preaching of the Gospel and for the celebration of the eucharist. But to be truly ecclesial, each community must be open to communion with other such communities...The Church of Christ is an interdependent whole...Such a connectional understanding of the Church means that both Catholics and Methodists recognise the need for effective pastoral ministries of unity and oversight within the one Church of Christ. Catholics and Methodists firmly believe that Christ wills one visibly united Church, even though they may differently identify the structures needed for such full communion'.

The common ecclesiological heritage of the two churches could not be more precisely stated together with the urgency and necessity of a continuing dialogue on the structures necessary to such connexion and communion.

² This term is usually spelt *connexional* in British English but in Methodism everywhere it reflects the understanding that there is one mission to God's one world and that in that mission, the sharing of resources by and between all local churches is essential.

³ Agreement on the essentially pastoral nature of ministry has characterised the earlier stages of the dialogue. The issue of understanding the relationship between the unique priesthood of Christ and the royal priesthood of all the faithful (often referred to within Methodism as the 'priesthood of all believers') on the one hand, and the priestly dimension of episcopal and presbyteral ministry remains an issue for further exploration as the present report stresses. The Catholic team commend the sensitive treatment of the issue in *Called To Love and Praise* but point out that its teaching is not fully congruent with Catholic understanding.

Paragraph 85 stresses the common acceptance by both churches of the need for continued reformation and renewal under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth. The process involves development in understanding of its teachings but involves more than that. 'There must be growth in love to achieve more insightful knowledge of the riches of faith. In other words there must be growth in holiness'. Here we have an echo of the teaching of the great Benjamin Gregory that the order is 'not first understand in order to love, but love in order to understand'⁴.

Having dealt with commonly accepted ecclesiological perspectives, the report moves on in chapter 3, *Deepening and Extending our Recognition of Each Other*, to look at what the two churches might be able to give to and receive from each other. The first para, 97, puts the point movingly when it asserts,

'It is time now to return to the concrete reality of each other, to look one another in the eye with love and esteem to acknowledge what we see truly to be of Christ and the Gospel, and thereby of the *Church* in each other'.

A degree of stress is put on the fact that the contrasting approaches of the two churches are not necessarily incompatible. Thus, the Methodist emphasis upon the faith of the individual is complementary to rather than incompatible with the traditional Catholic emphasis upon the faith of the community. Historically, Methodists have been unwilling to unchurch others, whereas Catholics have tended to stress the defects or lack of full ecclesial status of other churches; the gap between these emphases has narrowed since Vatican II with its teaching on the authentic ecclesial elements within other bodies and the very real importance of those ecclesial bodies in the salvation of their members. The report suggests that the two churches are edging towards a common understanding of Church as sacrament, citing both the report *Through Divine Love* of the American Catholic-Methodist dialogue and the teaching of the British Methodist ecclesiological statement, *Called To Love and Praise*. It asserts, 'the idea of a sacrament is ideally suited to holding together internal and external, visible and spiritual and both Methodists and Catholics have begun to speak of the Church itself in a sacramental way'.

Two sections of this chapter are then devoted to the exchange of gifts. First, the Methodist perspective is examined. Methodists recognise the common trinitarian faith of the two churches. They accept that the eucharistic teaching of the Roman Catholic Church resonates with that in the classical hymns of the Wesleys. They see many of the 'emphases' of Methodism paralleled in the Catholic Church, especially those on regular attendance at worship, the regular and faithful use of holy communion and the other means of grace, the commitment to justice and peace and, above all, the common stress on the call to holiness. Methodists recognise that the time has come to take seriously some Catholic forms of devotion of which they have previously tended to be wary. 'Greater awareness of the communion of saints and the Church's continuity in time, the sacramental use of material things and sacramental ministry to the sick and dying are also ecclesial elements and endowments that Methodists might profitably receive from Roman Catholics'. The emphasis upon the Church's continuity in time is reinforced with the statement that Methodists can now see the episcopal succession as a sign (but not a guarantee) of the unity of the Church in space and

⁴ Gregory, B. *The Holy Catholic Church*, London, 1873, p 172. (Gregory's work is the leading classical Wesleyan statement on ecclesiology)

time. They are also reminded of the statement about the Petrine ministry in the earlier report *Towards A Statement on the Church*⁵.

Methodists then 'invite Roman Catholics to receive afresh from the common Christian heritage certain ecclesial elements and endowments that currently may be more evident in Methodism than in the Roman catholic Church'. These include the gift of Christian conference as a means of discerning God's will for the Church, a greater lay activism and leadership in the mission of the Church and a greater flexibility and pragmatism in mission. They invite Catholics to consider the role of the ministry of the Word, Bible reading and study and 'meeting with others in small groups for fellowship, extempore prayer and mutual pastoral care'.

From their side, Catholics acknowledge the commitment of Methodism to holiness and to the connectional understanding and practice of Church. They recognise the emphasis common to both traditions upon 'responsible grace'. They accept that they can learn much from Methodism about the value of Scriptural devotion, hymnody and lay ministry. They believe that they can find inspiration in the example of the Wesleys. They commend to Methodists a re-examination of many of the issues that were divisive at the Reformation and subsequently, such as the nature of eucharistic sacrifice, priesthood and the issue of 'absolute confidence in Christ's work through the ministry of word and sacrament'.

The final chapter is entitled *Principles and Proposals for Developing Relations between Catholics and Methodists*. It admits that there are still many hard theological issues to be resolved but begins by stating that

'If relations between Catholics and Methodists are to develop further, gestures are required from both our communions that are both realistic and appropriate at the present time'. It is important to deepen the already existing degree of communion between the two churches and to advance 'unity by stages'.

The recommendations are addressed to the Methodist conferences, to the Catholic bishops' conferences, to bishops and equivalent church leaders, to the theologians of both traditions and to those responsible for ministerial formation. They include the caveat that, in neither case, should anything be done which breaches the discipline of either church but that both accept that there are very real gifts to be shared with the partner church. Both churches are encouraged to consider carefully what is essential within their respective traditions and what might, with integrity be changed or 'let go of'.

Catholics are encouraged to give concentrated attention to lay leadership within the Church, to the contribution of women to the Church's ministry and to 'the Church's corporate assurance as the context for the infallibility of the Pope'. Methodists are encouraged to consider the historic succession of bishops and the individual exercise of episcopate within a collegial ministry of oversight and to consider the exercise of universal primacy for the sake of unity and as an expression of the universality of the Church. Both churches are encouraged to invite members of the other to experience their forms of worship and spiritual devotion and to examine the bounds of legitimate diversity within the Church. Catholics are invited to be inspired by the example of the Wesleys and to promote the place of evangelical preaching,

⁵ para 58, in which Methodists accepted that whatever was essential to the unity of the Church must by its very nature be part of God's will for it.

Bible study and hymn singing in the Church whilst Methodists are encouraged to consider making a weekly eucharist the norm in their pattern of Sunday worship as well as exploring Catholic forms of devotion such as the Stations of the Cross and the veneration of Mary. Both churches are encouraged to co-operate in mission and in peace and justice projects.

These practical suggestions may, in the last resort prove to be the most significant aspect of the report. If faithfully acted upon, they will lead to a much greater degree of growing together than has, so far resulted from other bilateral dialogue reports. From fuller mutual reception of each others' authentic insights into Christian faith and authentic gifts may result a vision of the catholicity of the Church fuller and richer than its previous embodiment in either communion⁶. A key statement of faith in the ultimate guidance of the Holy Spirit occurs in para 144, where we read

'Full communion between Catholics and Methodists 'will also depend upon a fresh creative act of reconciliation which acknowledges the manifold yet unified activity of the Holy Spirit throughout the ages. It will involve a joint act of obedience to the sovereign Word of God'.

This report, in the way in which it combines serious theological reflection with a concern for practical and practicable initiatives in Christian life an witness represents an important methodological advance in ecumenical dialogue an deserves to be deeply pondered not just within the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches but by all committed to the Ecumenical Movement. The report is itself the fruit of a profound group experience on the part of the Commission members of the exchange of gifts. A moving tribute to the way in which the teaching and practice of the Wesleys has helped to enrich his own life and ministry as a Catholic bishop was given at the recent Durham conference on *Receptive Ecumenism* by the Catholic co-chair of the Commission, Bishop Michael Putney.

David Carter.

⁶ A point made both in the Methodist ecclesiological statement of 1937 and in the teaching of the late Yves Congar. The catholicity of the Church is dynamic not static and thus develops under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

OBITUARIES.

We are sorry to record the deaths of the following faithful members of the Society.

Mrs Iris Johnson
Mrs Alice Haste
Canon Edward Every
Mr Wilfred Spence
Mrs E. Wilkins
Bishop John Baycroft
Rev David Butler
Mr R.H. Marsden
Rev. M.J. Beasley
Miss Olive Hall
Mr Peter Kenyon
V. Rev. A. Barker
Sister M. Joseph.
Dr Avril Bruten.
Canon Bede Davis

Rev. David Butler was one of the foremost British Methodist ecumenists of his generation. As a student minister, he was able to study in Rome in the heady years after Vatican II. After ministries in Beckenham and Worcester Park in London, he became a lecturer at Queen's College, Birmingham, an ecumenical foundation, where he taught church history and ecumenics. During this period, he acted as co-secretary of the British Roman Catholic-Methodist Committee and also served on the international Catholic Methodist Commission from 1986-1991, playing a major role in the production of the one of its most influential dialogue reports, *The Apostolic Tradition*. A few years later, he devoted his sabbatical to study in Rome, the fruit of which was his immensely scholarly survey of Catholic-Methodist relations, Methodists and Papists. He followed that work up with doctoral research on Bishop Challenor and for this he received the degree of PhD. from the University of Birmingham. His later years were dogged by very considerable ill-health but he continued active in the British Catholic-Methodist Committee and as a consultant to the Association of Interchurch Families. He will be much missed in Methodism, in the Society and beyond.

Canon Edward Every was sometime a canon of the Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem and one of those Anglicans who particularly looked to Orthodoxy for inspiration. In old age, he lived at Warlingham, where your editor remembers meeting and conversing with him.

Bishop John Baycroft, a Canadian Anglican bishop, was for some years in charge of the Anglican Centre in Rome.

Dr Avril Bruten was author of one of our early pamphlets, *The Courtesy of our Lady: A Medieval View*.

Canon Bede Davis was parish priest of St Mary's, Falmouth for sixteen years and a keen member of our Cornwall Branch.

Mary in the Bidding prayers.

Keith Mitchell writes.

In the May 2006 issue of the Newsletter, Desmond Miller raises queries about the petition to Mary in the Bidding Prayers. Could we not have, at least in May, the Magnificat, Our Lady's Canticle. It is surely one of the greatest of Christian prayers. According to the Dominican writer, Gerald Vann, it is 'more than a song of praise and a revealing of the character of Mary: it is a summary of the attitude of the Christian soul to God and to life'. Another Dominican theologian, Giles Hibbert, quotes,

He has put down the mighty from their thrones
And exalted those of low degree.
He has filled the hungry with good things
And the rich have been sent empty away.

He adds 'This is not just what Mary said, or is presented as saying; it *is* the Gospel.

It seems to me a sad and serious deprivation, that this prayer is scarcely ever encountered in the Catholic liturgy. It has from an early date been in the canticle of Vespers; but where and when, now, is that ever sung? It still occupies a place in Anglican evensong, but that, too, alas, is becoming a rarity-though it has not entirely disappeared. It is at least said or sung in English. Most Anglicans of the older generation know it by heart.

It takes about thirty seconds to recite-perhaps a few seconds longer if the congregation join in. Is this relay an insuperable objection?

ECUMENICAL MARIAN PILGRIMAGE TRUST.

BRANCH NEWS

CORNWALL.

The Cornwall Branch held a meeting on 29 July, addressed by Fr Jonathan Bielawski on 'Medjorgorje, a personal impression'.

The Branch has established regular contact with the Cornwall Branch of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius.