

IRELAND AND THE CALL TO KOINONIA

This short paper takes the form of a personal and impressionistic perspective rather than a detailed scholarly judgement. The reason is as much to do with the topic as with the inevitable pressures of time. It is the beginning of a project that I hope to develop into something more substantial and less subjective, and which I hope will be of use to those fellow Christians who have so graciously welcomed me in my ministry in Ireland.

Thirty years ago, in 1977, I embarked on a year's study following the Master's programme of the (recently founded) Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin. It seemed as if those of us who gathered in Bea House (named after Cardinal Bea, the eminent Catholic ecumenist) were pioneers of a great new enterprise. Here were students from the Catholic and a number of the Protestant churches of Ireland. Here were people from Britain and other parts of the world, including a deeply troubled student from one of the black-led churches of South Africa, scarred by cultural and theological racism. Under the inspirational leadership of Father Michael Hurley we became familiar with the high ideals of the ecumenical movement and reasonably adept at working with the, even then, massive accumulation of ecumenical reports and literature. Dublin was a congenial if rather sleepy city, where no one was in any doubt about the Catholic hegemony of Irish society, but where other religious traditions seemed to be tolerated and respected. We were, of course, aware of another Ireland, a hundred miles to the north, where what have been euphemistically called 'The Troubles' were then at their grimmest and most deadly. One Monday a fellow student from Belfast brought back a tape he had made of a sermon by Ian Paisley in his own Free Presbyterian 'Martyrs' Memorial' Church. Its theme, stated and restated with uncompromising bluntness was: 'The ecumenical hijackers of the Protestant Church, apprehended, tried, sentenced and executed'. Listening to his rhetorical hammer-blows, each of us felt personally intimidated as Paisley named the ISE and denounced those Protestant churches which sent their students to such a den of spiritual and theological iniquity. His sermon ended with an evangelical call to those present to commit their lives to the Lord – a strange contrast from the vituperative aggression he had been directing towards others. It was intimidating, but we could not believe that it represented the future: surely we who had come together from a common cause for Christian unity would find ourselves on the winning side. During Holy Week in 1978 we all made a field trip to Belfast, seeing at first hand the devastation caused by the conflict and becoming more aware of the roots of the tension and hostility between Protestants and Catholics, but undaunted in our ecumenical confidence. At the end of the year we dispersed to various jobs and ministries in Ireland and in the rest of the world – I to teach theology in the South Pacific, as far from Ireland as it was possible to go. I guess that if we had been asked at that time what calling the Church was to fulfil as it served the present age we would have replied in something like these terms: 'The Church's calling is to share in God's mission, a mission that involves offering the gospel of Christ, serving the needs of the poor and challenging injustice.' We would, of course, have placed our emphasis on different phrases of that statement. But the Church, we all believed, was called to be one in order the better to fulfil its mission, becoming one that so the world might believe, becoming one as a testament to the possibilities for human unity. We took it for granted that such unity would involve tackling the thorny issues that had divided the churches (ministry and sacraments, for example) and on which local and international groups had already laboured for so long. We assumed, too, that the more Christians from different churches and traditions met and became acquainted with each other, the more divisions and misunderstandings would melt away. To get to know the other, we thought, led inevitably to understanding and understanding to unity and communion.

But that, as we say, was then and this is now. And today, thirty years later (and to my considerable surprise) I find myself serving the Methodist Church in Ireland as principal of its theological college in Belfast. It is certainly not the Ireland I left in 1978, but neither is it the glorious ecumenical day of which (we then thought) we had seen the unmistakable signs of dawn. Some changes are obvious. The Catholic hegemony is now as astonishingly absent as it was once disturbingly present. No longer does the Catholic Church occupy the moral high ground; indeed it is openly mocked and in Dublin priests are sometimes too fearful of ridicule to wear a clerical collar. Catholic control of issues such as

contraception has vanished. Vocations to the priesthood have dwindled almost to nothing. The decline in Irish Catholicism has been matched by an almost equally astonishing growth in affluence; the phrase 'the Celtic tiger' was coined to describe the massive economic development that occurred in the years after the Republic of Ireland joined the European Union. Dublin is sleepy no longer, but bustling, with vast new suburbs, crowded roads and a huge, young population ambitious for success. Even rural Ireland, for so long admired by visitors but abandoned by most of its own sons and daughters, has sprouted building projects in every corner – the phenomenon known unkindly as 'bungalow blight'. And from being, for centuries, a country that exported its young, strong and well-qualified, it has become a place of immigration and exile for those looking for a better life or escape from persecution. There are now (it is said) more native Polish speakers than native Irish speakers, and large populations from a dozen African countries as well as Asia and Latin America have produced a new sense of a multi-cultural (and even multi-faith) society. Many congregations, including Methodist ones, now have a dazzling range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds; in some cases churches that were hovering on the edge of extinction have enjoyed a sense of resurrection through such incomers.

And in the North (one gets used to trying to find politically-neutral ways of describing Ireland's division between two nation states, even though no such neutrality is possible) change is also manifest. Ian Paisley, now in his eighties, presides (to almost everyone's surprise) as First Minister over a devolved government that includes the Catholics and Republicans he has for so long vilified, this in spite of the fact that he is still capable of preaching fiery and aggressive sermons. Northern Ireland, too, has enjoyed economic revival and the so-called 'peace dividend' has accompanied the gradual petering-out of inter-communal violence. Belfast, like Dublin, is witnessing both a building boom and an influx of people seeking to share the prosperity. Yet, with its six-county hinterland, it remains scarred by decades of violence and divided in its vision for the future.

How are rest of the churches faring? In spite of recent decline (and a sense of developing secularism) Ireland continues to have a much higher rate of religious affiliation and Church attendance than most other parts of Europe. Methodism is one of the smaller of the traditional Protestant churches, which are dominated by The (Anglican) Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church of Ireland. Alongside them are a seemingly endless series of alternative and independent churches. Some, like the Brethren and Elim Pentecostals, are part of well-established networks. Some, like the Vineyard, are affiliated to new denominational structures. Others are entirely independent, seeing themselves as part of a pan-evangelical network of congregations, sometimes co-operating, often in competition. It seems as if few weeks go by without someone thinking, 'what Ireland really needs is another church'. There is even 'church planting' by some of the more ancient churches; for example, the several Orthodox congregations that have been formed – and which tend to be loyal to different branches of Orthodoxy. Compared with England (which, in spite of having an established church is a much more secular society) there is, especially in the North, a lingering sense of belonging to a Christian culture, a residual knowledge of the Christian story, and a sense of which Christian tradition you belong to. So what is the calling of the Church in the new Ireland? I sense (certainly in the North) churches looking around for a meaningful role. During the violence of the troubles churches to some extent knew what they were for. They served their community (Protestant or Catholic), supporting its victims, reaffirming its values and giving it hope. In some cases (and the Methodist Church provided a disproportionate number of them) clergy and people offered courageous resistance to the culture of violence and refused to share in the character assassination of other Christians. Bridge-building has been seen as a distinctive Methodist vocation and no one should under-estimate the remarkable witness, in season and out of season, of many of its people. There has been genuine commitment by many churches to the cause of reconciliation and healing. Yet there are few signs of any greater Christian unity. True, there is a covenant between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland (on which Gillian Kingston reported at the 2002 Institute) but it has yet to produce much tangible result. Only a very small proportion of Irish Christians belong to churches that are part of the World Council of Churches.

There are certainly many more denominations and separate churches in Ireland than there were thirty years ago. It would not be unfair to say that Irish church life (like church life in many other parts of

the world) is characterised more by the absence than by the presence of communion. In spite of lessening violence in the North and the decline of Catholic dominance in the South, *koinonia* between churches remains elusive. Not only is the reality of communion elusive, so is the aspiration to *koinonia* as a goal of ecclesial life. The challenge of embracing the otherness of fellow-Christians, of expanding the sense of communion to include other traditions, remains a distant goal.

Within this context – and I am all too aware of how sketchy my description has been - I find myself asking about the ecumenical vocation of the Christian Church. I do not yet have much in the way of an answer, but I can give a few more theological observations.

1 Ecclesiology and Otherness

Roger Haight's project of 'comparative ecclesiology' urges us to prioritise what he calls 'ecclesiology from below', that is to take seriously the ecclesiology implied by the lived experience of particular Christian communities in their own historical and cultural situation. I do not altogether share Haight's attack on traditional ecclesiology 'from above', but I do take the point that theology can become divorced from reality if it does not ask questions about the theological significance of lived reality. I suspect that this has been a danger in the ecumenical movement, which has been so strong on the theological logic of unity and so weak in bringing it about. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why closer communion has been such a long time coming.

In my future work I hope to describe the characteristics of the main ecclesiologies prevalent in Irish Churches. This will involve relating theologies of the church to a social context in which ecclesial difference serves as a jealously-guarded set of cultural boundaries, reflected, for example, in the way churches are or are not decorated and festivals are or are not celebrated. Such a relationship, I suspect, leads to an understanding of community that is (to say the least) in tension with the concept of communion. What I mean is this: *koinonia*, to the extent that it is an ecclesial aspiration in Irish church life, has an intra-cultural focus rather than an inter-cultural one. Most churches serve a constituency defined by culture and history: Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and so on. Clergy will often say that they serve a certain number of families – suggesting that each church has as it were a chaplaincy to a particular sector of Irish society. Within each sector there is often intense loyalty, genuine Christian communion and sharing, and an abundance of what is sometimes called 'social capital'. What is much more difficult to develop is an inter-cultural sense of *koinonia*, one that sees the value of communion with those who are culturally different and therefore belong to different Christian traditions.

2 Eucharistic Communion and Ecclesial Identity

A further aspect of my planned future research will relate ecclesial identity to Eucharistic theology and practice in Irish churches. When I arrived in Ireland, a senior Methodist minister, knowing something of my own predilections, warned me that 'all churches in Ireland – including the Catholic Church – are low church'. He meant that the liturgical priorities that I might have would not be much in evidence. That is certainly true, though not necessarily of first importance. More significant, I think, is the relatively low status of the Eucharist in almost all Irish churches and the fact that Eucharistic participation is also generally low. It has been a shock to sit in Methodist churches and find that the majority of the congregation either absent themselves from the eucharist or decline the invitation to receive it. Where the Eucharist is celebrated and people participate it often seems either an expression of personal piety (that is, individualistic rather than communal) or a sign of ecclesial exclusivity (the furore that greeted the shared celebration last year by a Catholic priest and Church of Ireland rector came from both churches). To this could be added the absence in most churches, of a developed theology and practice of Eucharist as *koinonia*. Such a situation gives little scope for the Eucharist to act as a sign of reconciled otherness.

3 The Eucharist as Mediated Otherness

If the churches are to have an ecumenical vocation in terms of a *koinonia* that embraces Christians of different cultural and denominational traditions, attention to their Eucharistic life will, I would argue, be vital. I have long believed that the Eucharist is itself a sign of the essential otherness of Christianity and of the possibility of communion in otherness. Participation in the Eucharist is impossible without a willingness to enter into communion with those in earlier (and very different) Christian generations and in those currently in very different cultural contexts from our own. Such 'communion in otherness' is reflected in the elements used, the scriptures read and the creeds recited, to name but a few of many aspects. The attempt to use the Eucharist either as sign of ecclesial particularity, or to assimilate it too closely to any one contemporary culture (for example through a misplaced zeal for contextualisation) undermines the potential for the Eucharist to be both sign and means of communion in the midst of otherness.

4 Communion and the Future of Irish Churches.

I realise that what I have written is in danger of seeming an ungracious criticism of the churches among which I work as a guest and from which I receive wonderful hospitality. I certainly do not intend it to be such. I intend to be a critical friend. There are certainly signs of hope for the fulfilment of the Irish churches' ecumenical vocation, and they indicate that my own thinking may need to undergo further change and development.

It is certainly important to point to the persistence of Christian communities that act as witnesses to communion in the midst of otherness. These may be ecumenical, such as the Corrymeela community, or rooted in a particular ecclesial tradition, as in the Benedictine community in Rostrevor which has a powerful ecumenical ministry. A second sign of hope is provided by the very recent and substantial influx of Christians into Ireland from the countries of the South, bringing with them different experiences of human and ecclesial community and an unwillingness to identify with the inherited understandings of otherness and exclusion. The third is, from my point of view more surprising. The independent churches that spring up so regularly, and of which I am naturally critical, tend not to buy into the cultural ecclesiology of the older churches. They often seek to escape the cultural locations of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant', enabling people from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds to find an ecclesial space in which they can find and practice *koinonia*.

The challenge to older churches, such as the Methodist Church in Ireland, is whether they can discern a 'calling to fulfil' that will 'serve the present age'. While the ecumenical ambitions of the nineteen-seventies would now need to be expressed rather differently, and perhaps more modestly, the vocation to share and express the *koinonia* that is both God's triune nature and God's gift and purpose for humanity, is as urgent as ever. To follow it churches will need both to take their inherited cultural and ecclesial traditions serious and look beyond them.

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