

London's Martyrs & Christian Unity

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We are accustomed today to recognising in the life of each community of Christians not separate Churches but the one Church of Christ. Each tradition may be distinctive; indeed most function quite separately. But gone are the days when we used to think of our own community as the one true Church to the exclusion of others.

For many centuries we denounced and excommunicated each other as false, heretical, or even anti-Christian. It was a way of asserting our own commitment to the truth and Christ; but it usually came at the price of un-Churching that of others. It is from this sharp relief into which we have put what it is or is not to be Christian, what it or is not to be Christ's Church, that our painful and costly history of mutual martyring came.

Our forebears, in trying to make sense of their sufferings for the way in which they followed Christ and called upon others to do so – literally for them a matter of life or death - identified with the experiences of Christians down the ages who laid down their lives before those who wished to destroy belief in the Risen Christ and the Church that believes in him. But it is one thing for the members of the Body of Christ to be harmed by the enemies of the cross of Christ: it is quite another for those who have taken up the cross of Christ to use it as a weapon against their own brothers and sisters. Next year we will be commemorating how British Christians brought about the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire from 1807. But we will also be recalling how British Christians – merchants, landowners, statesmen and royals, but also ordinary householders and traders too - kept and sold slaves, including their own fellow Christian brothers and sisters. Both the slavery and the martyrdoms are shameful episodes in the history of Christianity in our land. Today's commemoration enables us to own both the cruelty and the innocent suffering on all sides as part of our own history, to lament that history and to repent of anything in our hearts and action that in any way perpetuates it. And in common with each other, coming

together from different parts of the Church, we can ask God our Father to accept these martyrdoms on all sides and make them fruitful for the unity of Christ's disciples, as he himself prayed on the night before his own sacrifice.

In fact, this prayer is already being answered generously. Since the middle of the twentieth century, and the rediscovery of the idea of the Church familiar to the Scriptures and the Father, the churches have looked at themselves less as institutions and organisations, and more in terms of fellowship in Christ with the Father, participation in his risen life, communion. This 'togetherness', holding all things in common, this '*koinonia*', is not merely a human society, but the reality of existence in Christ's Body. As it is baptism which incorporates into this Body, so it is baptism which brings us into communion with the one Christ and with each other in the one Church of Christ, which is no more divisible than he is. Thus it has been possible to see clearly that, even though we are still separated in many ways and for complex reasons, we are nevertheless undivided in baptism; that this unity has become visible to us; and that, because 'the walls of separation do not rise as far as heaven', it established between us our communion in Christ. It therefore makes no sense to describe ourselves as out of communion with each other. We are either in communion in Christ or we are not – none of our Churches describes the status of each others' relation to Christ in terms other than of the reality of the life of baptism. There is no 'partial' or 'impaired' communion – just communion.

Yet still division and separation between Christians remain a reality; and so we can speak of broken relations - and therefore healing and reconciliation. But we can no longer speak of an absence, or a lack of communion. As Yves Congar reminded us, we speak of the re-integration of the Church, the re-composition of the Church from out of the separations of Christians – not the amalgamation of separate Churches.

Cardinal Kasper of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has emphasised this too. When we proclaim in the Creeds that we believe in this same 'communion of saints', we are not merely speaking of our fellowship in Christ's baptism, or our spiritual affinity and common belief – we are actually declaring our belief and participation in the Holy Communion – living the reality of our common baptismal life through the Eucharist. It is an irony that Christians' different ways of

approaching this mystery of the Eucharist, and therefore their understanding of the life of the baptised in the Church, are inextricably bound to the reasons why they brought such deep division into it in the sixteenth century; and why, too, they brought each other to martyrdom and sacrifice. But it is an answer to prayer down the centuries that our current inability to share the Eucharist together has nowadays become a spur to the Churches on all sides as we search for unity, and the communion that is completely visible. So we understand that the fullness of life in God to which we aspire, both for ourselves and for the whole world, means that we must become as God is, in the Church of God the Trinity who is one and whose Persons know no division.

Over the last two to three years, Churches Together in England, at the request of the member churches and the various ecumenical agencies and bodies in association, have been looking at the ways we in the one Church of Christ can become as God is and how our real communion can be shared and enriched, outside or beyond the Eucharist. It is known already in our relationship with Christ individually and in our local and denominational communities, but we also see more clearly how our churches and communions and unions belong with and to each other. Yet we are all too well aware that, even though most Christians in their churches receive the sacramental bread and wine at the Eucharist and experience deeply the common life and fellowship of the Christian Church, they do not do so together: Christians do not all partake of the one bread. Christians are separated at the very point which is the most significant for many traditions. And so the real and complete communion that is ours in baptism is invisible to us and to the world when it comes to the Eucharist. All the Churches are committed to overcoming the obstacles to realising this full inter-communion so that it the life of union with Christ which we commend to the world can be seen by the world in our union with each others. There has been a good deal of progress through dialogue and growing mutual understanding. And acting together on mission, social justice, pastoral care, peace and reconciliation, humanitarian relief, relations with other faiths and with secular society, has shown how much we are united, and how beneficial our concerted efforts are. Increasingly there is a sense of a common life, not just in worship and service, but also in our identity and sense of purpose. We recognise the one-ness of the Church and understand increasingly that our bonds cannot be broken. Which is why the ecumenical partners,

with respect for the integrity of each others' position, and without blame, are seeking to deepen our awareness of the Eucharist in each other's tradition, to uncover what it is we and mean concerning our sense of deprivation and pain at being unable to share it together, and to enrich our understanding of what unites us in communion in other ways, in the hope of coming closer to God and each other until we are no longer divided at the Eucharist.

Shortly, the Churches Together in England will publish an account of this exploration under the title, *Enriching Communion*. It will consider the experience of the Eucharist in the various traditions and how this has figured in their desire for unity from very different histories. It will face the paradox of how the Eucharist effects unity through Holy Communion within a tradition, yet can also mark the boundaries at which the integrity of one excludes that of another – even when both perceive in the Eucharist their life in union with Christ in the fellowship of his one Church.

But while the Eucharist may be the prime instance of communion in the Church, signs of it, themselves rich and unifying, abound in other parts of the Church's experience. Fellowship in Christ, and communion with and in him and with each other is also to be found in

- our common service in the world, to which the gift of the Eucharist is a sign of the Creator's providence, his self-giving to his world, the duty of the Church to serve him as one, not only in worship but in feeding the hungry.
- the Eucharist as an event in the cosmic order of things, a perpetual presence of Christ, affecting and forming human society, lives and cultures, as well as constituting the Church's nature as a community witnessing to the risen Lord.
- the Word – the Christ encountered in the sacraments, also draws his people into deeper unity through the study of the Scriptures, the common preaching of the Gospel, in teaching and evangelization, and in living the Gospel daily
- service - we are strongly united in social concern and care. On a planet divided by injustice and threatened by materialism, war and lack of access to health and food, Christians collaborate to bring relief and restore trust and hope through belief in the God of love, and reconciliation for humanity and all creation

- prayer – from ecumenical religious communities like Iona and Sant’Egidio, to regular local spirituality and prayer groups, and high profile events such as the Women’s World Day of Prayer, or the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity itself – we realise that we can ‘agree in prayer’ beyond the bounds of our earthly organizations and institutions. Paul Couturier in the 1930s, envisaged an ‘invisible monastery’ where we could each unite with Christ beyond earthly limitations. Today this includes the ‘invisible Church’ in cyberspace.
- acts of worship – beyond joint services in the Week of Prayer or at Pentecost, and sharing hymns and spirituality, customs in our worship can point us to the Eucharist and show our communion in Christ, even if in part. These include the regular footwashing at the Eucharist in black majority churches; the sharing of the Peace; the blessing of other Christians at Holy Communion; the *agape* before the Eucharist in the Moravian tradition; the sharing of bread and wine blessed at the vigil before the Orthodox Liturgy or during the Eucharist itself
- our understanding of the sacramentality of the whole of life, familiar in Orthodox thinking and incarnational spirituality in all our churches, is also at the heart of communities where worship is not sacramental in the same way, such as with the Salvation Army, or the Religious Society of Friends
- in the awe, wonder and silence, beyond the expressions of belief and devotion in worship, proclamation and theology, at the point where we are still before God. Here we recognise together in expectation that fellowship and communion which is already upon us but which we still wait to see

But today we contemplate our fellowship in life and death, how our communion in Christ is found in the communion of the saints, especially those who are completely at one with Christ in the power and example of his own sacrifice for the world and its people, the martyrs. From such different and divided understandings of a nevertheless common faith in him - at one with him, are they not at one with each other? And if they, the honoured martyrs and heroes of our different traditions, are one in Christ, can they truly mark our separation? Has their sacrifice, their faithfulness unto death, their devotion to Christ crucified, shown us that in the power

of his Cross, making peace by his blood, we are reconciled, and can even now be seen to be one?

In 1998 ten statues of martyrs of the twentieth century were unveiled on the West Front of Westminster Abbey: Maximilian Kolbe, Manche Masemola, Janani Luwum, Elizabeth of Russia, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Esther John, Lucian Tapiedi, Wang Zhiming. Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Baptist, Lutheran, and Evangelical are represented here, to be numbered with the great cloud of witnesses by which we are surrounded. The Abbey makes a great declaration that the martyrs belong to the whole Church, not to a section of it.

Pope John Paul II wrote in 1995 in *Ut Unum Sint* of the deep communion which exists with those who have given their lives for the faith:

In a theocentric vision, we Christians already have a common Martyrology. This also includes the martyrs of our own century, more numerous than one might think, and it shows how, at a profound level, God preserves communion among the baptized in the supreme demand of faith manifested in the sacrifice of life itself. The fact that one can die for the faith shows that other demands of the faith can also be met. I have already remarked, and with deep joy, how an imperfect but real communion is preserved and is growing at many levels of ecclesial life. I now add that this communion is already perfect in what we all consider the highest point of the life of grace, *martyria* unto death, the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off (cf. Eph 2.13).

While for all Christian communities the martyrs are the proof of the power of grace, they are not the only ones to bear witness to that power. Albeit in an invisible way, the communion between our Communities, even if still incomplete, is truly and solidly grounded in the full communion of the Saints - those who, at the end of a life faithful to grace, are in communion with Christ in glory. These Saints come from all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities which gave them entrance into the communion of salvation.

When we speak of a common heritage, we must acknowledge as part of it not only the institutions, rites, means of salvation and the traditions which all the communities have preserved and by which they have been shaped, but first and foremost this reality of holiness.

Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (Rome 1995), paragraph 84

One of the advances of the last half century has been the willingness of Churches to recognise that the heroes of the faith (whether or not they are called 'saints') can be appreciated, valued and revered across the Christian traditions: their integrity and fidelity are exemplary for the whole Church. The saints on earth and those in heaven are marked by the same Spirit, are a single Body, and the communion of saints has eschatological significance.

Yet there is pain within the communion: the witness of some saints has been against other members of the single Body, and martyrdom was inflicted by some Christians upon others. Some glorious deaths were caused by the attitudes and actions of inglorious Christians or church authorities. Conversation have been taking place in Oxfordshire about how all the county's martyrs can be commemorated together - whichever 'side' they were on in Reformation times. In 2004 the Tower of London saw an ecumenical service honouring John Fisher, who along with Thomas More had been executed there in 1535. Tribute was paid to 'the generosity of spirit and imagination' which lay behind the commemoration. A further event commemorated Bishop Nicholas Ridley in a similar spirit. Last year Charterhouse celebrated the Carthusian martyrs as saints belonging to the history and identity of all parts of the Church in this land.

When the saints and martyrs are valued, there is a greater sense of the catholicity and the heritage of the Church. Denominations and Churches do not start on a particular date, or with a particular event - their history stretches back, before the divisions and separation: that is one lesson that is being learnt. The harder one is to acknowledge the holiness within a tradition from which we are separated: to do that is to enrich the communion of which we are all a part.