

Deepening the Spiritual in the Ecumenical

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Why do we need Receptive Ecumenism? We can point to several stages in the still young (at least, young in terms of the church's life) ecumenical movement. There was the first flurry of getting to know each other, learning about each other, uncovering misunderstandings and working together on joint projects, along with establishing genuine friendships.¹ However, as remarkably successful as ecumenism has been, traditional ecumenical approaches have in some senses now plateaued.

It is not uncommon to speak of an ecumenical winter, where progress seems difficult. This is where Receptive Ecumenism is such a breath of fresh air – instead of continuing to push up against the same barriers, it takes a different approach – it changes direction and dives *within*.

We are at a point where ecumenism can only move forward by diving deeper. It is to this need to go “deeper” that Receptive Ecumenism responds. While it is practical and theological, Receptive Ecumenism also fosters a deeply spiritual and virtuous approach to ecumenism, emphasising that the primary ecumenical relationship is not between Christians, but between us and Christ.²

Ecumenical dialogue is not undertaken for our own sake, our own pride, because it is something we feel obliged to do, or for others or their own good – instead, ecumenism is undertaken for Christ's sake, in response to his call for us to *be one*. It just so happens that, in drawing closer to Christ, we all also draw closer to each other. But Christ is the centre, and it is towards Christ and the Spirit that Receptive Ecumenism orientates us.

As may already be clear, Receptive Ecumenism therefore is an advanced level ecumenical approach, building on already established relations. It is not so much about learning about or working together, but rather about listening to the Spirit's pull, which draws us more deeply towards Christ. Paul Murray calls Receptive Ecumenism a “virtuous virus” and the virtues are particularly at play within it.³ Virtues such as love, humility, courage, hope, prudence, and faith offer guidance in discerning ecclesial learning. Guided by virtues, Receptive Ecumenism developed out of the trajectory of Spiritual Ecumenism, emphasised by Vatican II as the “soul” of the entire ecumenical movement.

And it is this deepening of the spiritual in the ecumenical which is needed today. As Kasper points out, to disregard the spiritual aspects of ecumenism is to distort the entire ecumenical drive. As he explains, if bereft of a focus on Spiritual ecumenism, then ecumenism “becomes

¹ Michael Putney, ‘A Catholic Understanding of Ecumenical Dialogue,’ in Elizabeth Delaney, Gerard Kelly and Ormond Rush (eds.), *My Ecumenical Journey*, ed. (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2014), 189.

² Putney, ‘A Catholic Understanding of Ecumenical Dialogue,’ 184.

³ Murray, ‘Afterword: Receiving of Christ in the Spirit: The Pneumatic–Christic Depths of Receptive Ecumenism’, in *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ*, Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes (eds.), (Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2018), 160.

a soulless bureaucracy and is destined to exhaust itself.”⁴ In a similar manner, Michael Putney writes: “Ecumenism is always an intensely spiritual experience. It occurs in the Spirit. To engage in dialogue is no more than to respond to the Holy Spirit.”⁵ And with foresight, Margaret O’Gara opined that “perhaps we will not be surprised when the spiritual ecumenism of which the Second Vatican Council speaks becomes an even more central instrument for dialogue between Christians in the coming decades” especially for younger generations.⁶

Receptive Ecumenism is a challenging approach – requiring both the courage and humility to discern areas of our own tradition where we have not lived up to being who the Spirit calls us to be. A key challenge of Receptive Ecumenism is that those involved must be open to change, to conversion. ARCIC III correctly identifies Receptive Ecumenism as being “more about self-examination and inner conversion than convincing the other.”⁷ Interior conversion is obviously no easy or quick goal, but a serious ongoing ecclesial challenge. As Gerard Kelly points out, resistance to ecclesial change is complex. He asserts that fear or reluctance to change is often not about “ill will” but rather expresses “a lack of imagination...”⁸ In order for a tradition to be open to change, there needs to be receptiveness to the Spirit and a self-critical and imaginative consideration of where renewal needs to occur.

Receptive Ecumenism seeks to renew ecclesial identities, which, as Catherine Clifford explains, requires placing Christ at the centre of our identities, and may in fact involve freeing ourselves of false selves.⁹ The Spirit is the prime driver of this process, as Congar writes, “The Holy Spirit, then, leads us and guides us into ‘all truth.’”¹⁰ Recognising the Spirit’s role in guiding Receptive Ecumenism also makes it apparent that learning from other churches at its deepest level is a learning from the Holy Spirit.

This point clarifies a possible misunderstanding of Receptive Ecumenism: it is not about cutting and pasting ideas or gifts from one tradition into another. Rather it is about listening to the Spirit through a process of receptive ecclesial learning aimed towards interior conversion, in order to become more fully who we are called to be. RE is, therefore, an organic and authentic process of ecclesial conversion. Far from becoming an unstable

⁴ Walter Kasper, Presentation at the event marking the 40th anniversary of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC, accessed online:

<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century>

⁵ Putney, ‘A Catholic Understanding of Ecumenical Dialogue,’ 185.

⁶ Margaret O’Gara, “Ecumenical Dialogue: The Next Generation,” in *No Turning Back: The Future of Ecumenism*, ed. Michael Vertin (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), 230.

⁷ ARCIC III, “ARCIC III - First Meeting Communique,” *ARCIC and IARCCUM* <http://anglicancentre.churchinsight.com/Publisher/Article.aspx?ID=320801>

⁸ Gerard Kelly, “What is Receptive Ecumenism?” in *The Gift of Each Other: Learning from Other Christians*, ed. Gideon Goosen (Sydney: The New South Wales Ecumenical Council, 2013), 7.

⁹ Catherine E. Clifford, “Kenosis and the Church: Putting on the Mind of Christ,” *One in Christ* 43, no. 2-5 (2009), 5.

¹⁰ Yves Congar, *Dialogue Between Christians: Catholic Contributions to Ecumenism*, trans. Philip Loretz (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 104-105.

mishmash of parts of other traditions, some kind of Frankenstein's monster, through Receptive Ecumenism, the tradition becomes more fully itself.

Receptive Ecumenism challenges us to undertake deep self-examination in light of who we are called to be in Christ. Jesus' cutting words in Matt. 7:3–5 are relevant here: we are urged to remove the logs from our own eyes first, so that the way we see others, ourselves, and God, can be restored. Humility is therefore essential, not in a negative sense—the misunderstood notion of putting down or discarding one's own tradition—but in a therapeutic sense, recognizing wounds and weaknesses in order to address them.

Walter Kasper says that “we can only widen the ecumenical dialogue when we deepen it.”¹¹ Receptive Ecumenism offers just such a deep dive into the heart of ecumenism; in the same way, I hope that this mini conference helps us all dive deeper into Receptive Ecumenism.

¹¹ Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity Today* (London: Burns & Oates, 2004), 17.