The Blessing
and Challenge of
Ecumenism
THE BLESSING AND CHALLENGE OF ECUMENISM

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RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM: OPEN POSSIBILITIES FOR CHRISTIAN RENEWAL
by Donald Bolen

Georges Tavard once wrote that each church would do well to look to the history of its dialogue partners during the centuries of separation, “to ask if it should not learn from the other . . . a memory that it has itself missed.” I have always liked the quote and the notion of learning a memory belonging to others, a memory of what God has been doing in their midst. In his book, Crossing the Threshold of Hope, Pope John Paul II suggests something very similar when, in pondering why the Holy Spirit had permitted so many divisions among Christ’s disciples through the centuries, he asks: “Could it not be that these divisions have been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ’s Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ? Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise.”

The implied notion that there are memories to be learned, insights of the Gospel to be retrieved, and “Christian treasures of great value” to be found in other churches is an underlying assumption at the heart of a new initiative called “Receptive Ecumenism.” Paul Murray, who coined the phrase, is a lay Roman Catholic theologian teaching at the University of Durham in the north of England. He has coordinated three international colloquia, edited a major volume, and initiated a local pilot project to test and refine the governing principles and practice of what he hopes will be an initiative to encourage the revitalizing of Christian churches through ecumenical learning.¹²

³ Addressing the observers at the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul spoke of having come into contact “with Christian treasures of great value” in the Christian communities they represented.
⁴ The first colloquium, held in conjunction with the University of Durham granting Cardinal Kasper an honorary doctorate, was in January 2006. The colloquium led to the publication of Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford
Murray knows well the landscape of ecumenical initiatives, including those of the Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, and other Christian Communions over the past five decades. His initiative builds on the work of dialogue and on efforts towards common prayer, joint witness, and mission. But receptive ecumenism challenges churches to move also in a different direction—through an attitudinal shift in the way they approach other Christian churches. It invites a turn from what the dialogue partner can learn from us to what we can learn from them. It takes values that have always been quietly essential to good ecumenical work—self-critical hospitality, humble learning and ongoing conversion—and makes them into “the explicit required strategy and core task of contemporary ecumenism.” Murray notes that he could say of receptive ecumenism what William James said of pragmatism in his 1907 volume on the subject—it is “A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking.”

It is useful to begin with Murray’s diagnosis of the current ecumenical landscape. On the one hand, he argues that the “once widely held hope for structural unification in the short-medium term is, in general, now widely recognised as unrealistic.” He also takes as a given the ecumenical fatigue and energy drain that characterizes the current context; the sense that our dialogues have reached an impasse as they have sought to address the issues at the heart of our divisions. And he laments the gap between all that the dialogues have produced and the “rather slim” amount of “actual effective ecclesial learning that has taken place at more than a notional or theoretical level.”

On the other hand, he strongly affirms the need for our churches to remain committed to the goal of full visible unity as Christ’s will for the church. Receptive ecumenism “firmly resists relinquishing . . . (the) aspiration for full visible structural and sacramental unity and the correlative commitment to walking the way of ecclesial conversion that this requires.” While full unity may be an eschatological reality, “it would be poor eschatology that led us to conclude that it is, therefore, a reality that is of no relevance to the contingencies of present existence.” Giving up on that goal is akin to “giving up on the aspiration for economic justice which will likewise always be elusive in this order.”

Given this assessment of the current ecumenical situation and an unbending commitment to the goal of full visible unity, Murray raises pragmatic questions: What does it mean “to live now, oriented upon such goals? . . . What is the appropriate ethic for life between the times in relation to this calling?” He insists that the Christian God does not lead us into a corner and prod us with a stick, but asks, where is God leading us, opening a space for us to grow ecumenically in the present moment?

Locating the ecumenical task within the context of larger challenges confronting Western society, he suggests that the key question of our age is “whether we can live difference for mutual flourishing rather than mutually assured destruction.” The notion of “living difference well” suggests, however, not only a secular challenge but also an ecclesiological one, grounded in the nature of a Trinitarian God. The churches “are called in their very living and working together . . . to be a living witness to difference well-lived in the conviction that difference well-lived goes to the very heart of the Trinitarian being of God.”

The way in which Christians and Christian communities seek to address their differences through engaging in respectful and rigorous dialogue.
dialogue, turning together to the Scriptures, tradition and their separate histories, is a witness the world needs to hear. But Murray’s focus in this initiative is not on dialogue so much as on learning from the differences in other Christian traditions: “receptive ecumenical learning within and between the separated Christian traditions goes to the very heart of the evangelical call to witness to the possibility of living reconciled difference for mutual flourishing in a world of blood-soaked conflict.”

Receptive Ecumenism is in the first instance not a project but an ethic, one which draws part of its inspiration from the “turn to the other” espoused by Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In a context of division, it invites churches to move away from competition with the other and towards “the need to attend to and to act upon their specific responsibilities revealed in the face of the other.” This implies more than simply tolerating the other, or coming to recognize the other’s approach as complementary and of value, but rather, delving into the “deep implications of the other’s differing perspective” for one’s ecclesial life, opening a space for the possibility of genuine learning. The basic principle is that considerable further ecumenical progress is indeed possible but only if each of the traditions, both singly and jointly, make a clear, programmatic shift from prioritising the question, ‘What do our various others first need to learn from us?’ to asking instead, ‘What do we need to learn and what can we learn—or receive—with integrity from our others?’

The invitation to churches here is for each tradition to take “responsibility for its own potential learning from others” and to be “willing to facilitate the learning of others as requested but without either requiring how this should be done, or even making others’ learning a precondition to attending to one’s own.” This move away from the logic of “we’ll learn from you if you learn from us” calls forth a real maturity from our churches. Murray notes that our hidden assumption in ecumenical relations has been that “life would be a lot easier if only they were a bit more like us.” Instead, he is suggesting that “what we need to do is to spin the telescope around 180 degrees, and approach the other, not thinking, ‘how can we get them to see my beauty’, but saying, ‘what’s their beauty that speaks into my life?’” He speaks of embracing a “unilateral willingness to walk the path of ecclesial conversion,” not solely or principally to build up ecumenical relations, but “for the sake of the greater flourishing of one’s own tradition.”

Murray notes that such an ethic can be embraced at every level of ecclesial life. It is “as simple yet all pervasive as the Gospel it represents,” with a starting point that “befits the character of Christian life, the way of hope-filled conversion.” And it invites changing our view of the place of ecumenism in church life. He summarizes well an attitude we have often encountered, and perhaps expressed, in relation to ecumenism: “Yeah, okay, I accept that it’s a very good thing, but I have this very long list of things that I’ve got to do, with an ever-shrinking congregation, with an ever-shrinking number of presbyters and ministers.” In this mindset, ecumenism represents one more task in a ministerial or parish workload that is already overwhelming. Murray counters it by suggesting that ecumenical learning is precisely what can help us address our challenges. It may well be the principal way in which the Holy Spirit is resourcing us, by learning from how other Christian traditions face the same difficulties confronting us. We do so “not by picking up another’s tradition and plumbing it into our own, but like music, transposing it so it can be sung in a way that is recognizably Anglican or recognizably Methodist or authentically Catholic.”

American Jesuit Thomas Reese, who delivered an address at the first Receptive Ecumenism conference in 2006, observed that, while in the past, many saw reform within the Roman Catholic Church as essential to ecumenical progress, “today the reverse is also true:

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13 “Establishing the Agenda,” 19.
16 Ibid., 15.
17 “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning,” 41.
18 Ibid., 32.
19 “Establishing the Agenda,” 15; cf. 12, 17.
20 “Reform and Renewal.”
21 Ibid., 16, 12.
22 “Reform and Renewal.”
ecumenism is an essential path to church reform." Murray notes that for some time now we have been learning from each other liturgically, but receptive ecumenism invites us to engage in learning also concerning the organizational realities of our churches, how we make decisions, how we communicate the gospel message and carry out the mission given us by the Lord.

Murray envisages how receptive ecumenical learning could lead each tradition to be “fruitfully re-imagined in the light of its own ecumenical others.” It offers “a long-term learning opportunity in which the churches might progress towards their calling and destiny in the only way possible—by slow and difficult growth in maturity.” Such growth cannot be programmed or anticipated. It is likely to come in an ad hoc way, yet one that enriches Christian communities over time on all levels of our ecclesial lives. From this perspective, the ecumenical scene can be understood “not simply as a problem-strewn field but as one of open possibilities, across which the only path is one of long, slow learning into greater life and maturity—this is not a second-best accommodation compared with a supposedly alternative faster route but the only route possible, the golden highway.”

There is an intrinsic humility built into the notion of ecumenical learning. Murray suggests that often in our relations with other Christian churches, we foster an ecumenism of the “best china tea set,” where we put on display our strengths, our achievements, what we do well. Receptive ecumenism calls instead for “an ecumenism of the wounded hands.” “Our traditions are limited as well as life giving, wounded as well as grace-bearing. We need to show rather than to hide our wounds and to ask our others to minister to us.” This approach has long been lauded on a personal level, but Murray notes that “the openness to growth, change, examination of conscience and continual grace-filled conversion that lies at the heart of Christian life pertains as much to the ecclesial as to the personal.” Not only as individuals, but as churches, we do well to foster a keen attentiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the other, and a self-critical eye to oneself, with the aim of being converted ever more deeply.

This conversion is not ultimately about sacrifice, but about enrichment. Murray notes that all effective receptive ecumenical learning is not only a matter of the head but also of the heart; a matter of being attracted by, even falling in love with, the grace-filled beauty in another tradition and being impelled to move towards it, even when such a move has its cost. In ecumenical circles, it is almost creedal to say that the more we are converted to Christ, the closer we move to one another. In Paul Murray’s formulation, the suggestion is that, through our ecumenical encounters and efforts, we also have the potential to come closer to Christ. Receptive learning “will move us closer to finding ourselves in the other, the other in ourselves, and each in Christ.”

Murray suggests that such learning would make each Christian community more authentically itself. It would not be a matter of making the Catholic Church less Catholic but “more fully, more richly Catholic and, hence, more fully, more richly the church of Christ; more clearly the ‘sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind.’” Receptive Ecumenism “is about the intensification, complexification, and further realization of identity, not its diminishment and loss.”

The challenge is for each tradition to become more fully itself, more fully the church of Jesus Christ, by learning from the richness of other traditions. This will require receptivity and openness, but not a compromising of one’s ecclesial identity. Murray is confident that such ecumenical learning could strengthen the identity and richness

24 “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning,” 32.
25 “Establishing the Agenda,” 15.
26 “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning,” 33.
27 “Reform and Renewal.”
29 Ibid.
30 “Establishing the Agenda,” 15; cf. 12.
32 Ibid., 18, citing Lumen Gentium (The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964), §1.
33 Ibid., 17.
of each family of churches. It could strengthen the relationships among churches, "because we will each be on a journey of conversion that is going to take us places that are unimaginable, by fulfilling that which is possible and achievable and by opening other doors that are not yet seen." And, of great importance, it could strengthen our witness to the world, by living authentically the call to conversion and the richness of the Gospel we proclaim.35

Conclusion
Paul Murray is a Roman Catholic theologian, and his receptive ecumenism initiative is deeply and carefully rooted in Catholic ecclesiology and ecumenical principles. In his 1995 papal encyclical on ecumenism, Ut Unum Sint, Pope John Paul II had noted that ecumenical dialogue involves not only an exchange of ideas but also an "exchange of gifts" (§28). He added that ecumenical encounter "works to awaken a reciprocal fraternal assistance, whereby Communities strive to give in mutual exchange what each one needs in order to grow towards definitive fullness in accordance with God's plan (cf. Eph 4:11-13)."36 Pope John Paul was building on the ecumenical principles set forth in the Second Vatican Council. In sum, wherever elements of the church have been more effectively emphasized in other Christian Communities, wherever the fruits of the Holy Spirit have been received in ways that differ, but are complementary to their reception in the Catholic Church, wherever a fuller appreciation of any aspect of revelation is found, one can speak of gifts which could be received by the Catholic Church, gifts with the potential to lead its faithful to "a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church."37

34 "Reform and Renewal."
35 Ibid.