

Receptive Ecumenism: A Faith and Order Perspective

Introduction

It is an honour to address this august gathering, and with my colleague Dr Tamara Grdzeldze, to express the support of the Faith and Order Secretariat of the World Council of Churches for Receptive Ecumenism, one of great gifts to the contemporary Ecumenical Movement. I must confess, however, a certain anxiety about being here as the Director of Faith and Order. Let me explain. Receptive Ecumenism has been, and will continue to be, a tremendous success. A simple gauge of its popularity is “googling” Receptive Ecumenism to discover the 7480 “hits” where it gets mentioned!¹

Some online commentators hail Receptive Ecumenism as the “new step forward,” the harbinger of the “spring-time of ecumenism,” the “new spiritual ecumenism,” if not, indeed, the “new ecumenism.” This makes me nervous. I wonder: what happened to the *old* ecumenism? As one commentator has stated:

[Receptive Ecumenism] ...is not simply ecumenism as shared mission, or ecumenism as problem-solving and incremental agreement but ecumenism as a vital long-term programme of individual, communal and structural conversion driven, like the Gospel that inspires it, by the promise of conversion into greater life and flourishing. The aim is for the Christian traditions to become more, not less, than they currently are by learning from, or receiving of, each other's gifts.²

Or, as the *Tablet* put it just after the 2006 conference:

In deepest Winter there are a few intimations of spring. An early snowdrop, the scent of witch hazel and the buds of Lenten roses just emerging. But if we are in the middle of an ecumenical winter, there are signs that the cause of Christian unity is not dead.³

Receptive Ecumenism is that sign of spring. To ask “What, in any given situation, can's one own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?”⁴ rather than “what can another tradition learn from us” is of tremendous ecumenical and ecclesiological significance, not only for Roman Catholics but for all of us. In practice, receptive ecumenism and ecumenical learning are not new; in one form or another they have been with us for a long time in varying degrees. What is new is the naming of Receptive Ecumenism as such, with a robust theological rationale, and the claiming of its ground as vital for contemporary ecumenism.

¹ As of 17 December 2008.

² <http://www.kandle.ie/2008/10/30/receptive-ecumenis/>

³ 26 January 2006; <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/507>

⁴ In Paul Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning—Establishing the Agenda,” in Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 12

My anxiety is that Receptive Ecumenism—and with it Spiritual Ecumenism—may be for *some* the soft option, a way of avoiding the difficult and misunderstood theological ecumenism of the bilateral dialogues, the sort of thing that Faith and Order does at the multilateral level, the sort of ecumenism which is intentionally directed towards structural or organic unity of the churches. Or, it may signal an “attitude of impatience,”⁵ a way to soothe the discouragement at the slow pace of the bilateral and multilateral dialogues, if not their apparent failure.⁶ Paul Murray notes the mood in which “... the sense that ecumenical engagement is made easier when it focuses on collaborating in practical activities of service and mission rather than on unravelling arcane mysteries of faith and order regarded as blocking the way to structural unity.”⁷

A question pertaining to my anxieties is the relationship between the words “receptive” and “reception,” as well as the terms Receptive Ecumenism and Ecumenical Reception. A working definition of reception which shapes my understanding comes from the 2006 Agreed Statement of the International Commission on Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue, *The Church of the Triune God*:

... the divided churches are being called not only to receive from one another but also to receive one another. This raises fundamental ecclesiological questions, since in the context the highest degree of reception is not doctrinal agreement but mutual recognition. Ecumenically, reception is coming to be seen as a process, guided by the Holy Spirit, in which churches are called to acknowledge elements of sanctification and truth in one another. This implies that they are being called to recognise in one another elements of Christ’s Church.⁸

This broad understanding is contrasted in the text to the more narrow and so-called classical understanding of Ecumenical Reception by “fixed organs and procedures of reception.”⁹ It resonates with the direction of Receptive Ecumenism as it speaks of mutual recognition, moving beyond receiving *from* one another to *receiving* one another, “the highest degree of reception.”

A complementary definition comes from the Eighth Report of the Joint Working Group of the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. In its reflection on “The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue,” the JWG states:

“Reception” is the process by which the churches make their own the results of all their encounters with one another, and in a particular way the convergences and agreements

⁵ Cf. Paul Murray, “Establishing the Agenda,” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 10.

⁶ Cf. Paul Murray: “More generally, however, the urgent hope for foreseeable structural unity—the mainstay of so much committed ecumenical activity from the late 1960s, throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s—appears to have run out of steam.” “Establishing the Agenda,” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 9.

⁷ Paul Murray, “Establishing the Agenda,” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 10

⁸ *The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus statement of the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue 2006* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2006), pp. 97-98.

⁹ Cyprus Agreed Statement, p. 98

reached on issues over which they have historically been divided. As the report of the sixth forum on bilateral dialogues notes: “Reception is an integral part of the movement towards that full communion which is realised when ‘all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness’.”¹⁰ Thus reception is far more than the official responses to the dialogue results, although official responses are essential. However, even though they are not concerned with the full range of interchurch relations, the results of the international theological dialogues are a crucial aspect of reception, as specific attempts to overcome what divides churches and impeded the unity willed by our Lord.¹¹

The JWG’s understanding of reception is broad, but does recognise the specific and indispensable place of the reception of doctrinal convergences and agreements.

Ecumenical Reception and Receptive Ecumenism

I must confess that when I first heard of Receptive Ecumenism, I thought it was about the reception of agreed statements. From the volume *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* there is unequivocal support for theological dialogue: I think of the strategically placed second chapter of the volume by Margaret O’Gara, “Receiving Gifts in Ecumenical Dialogue.”¹² Other chapters either ignore theological dialogue, or appear guarded or even negative; I think of Ladislav Orsy’s chilling (and perhaps anachronistic) comparison between the reception of the Council of Florence and the reception of agreed statements.¹³ While the authors of *Receptive Ecumenism* accord a place for ecumenical dialogue, there is not a corresponding interest in their formal reception as such. Such is not the aim of Receptive Ecumenism. As Paul Murray makes clear in his opening article:

Equally, nor does Receptive Ecumenism simply reduce to a concern to promote the approval, appropriation, and dissemination at the local level of the formulated results of the higher-level bilateral processes, as—given the connotations of unidirectional passivity frequently, if inappropriately, associated with the concept of reception—the better-known phrase ‘Ecumenical Reception’ can potentially suggest. Rather, Receptive Ecumenism represents the concern to bring to the fore the prior necessary disposition to receptive transformational learning that the bilateral processes presuppose.¹⁴

¹⁰ Cited by Ricardo Larini in his article “Texts and Contexts—Hermeneutical Reflections on Receptive Ecumenism” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 90.

¹¹ “The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue” in the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, *Eighth Report* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), pp. 82-83.

¹² Margaret O’Gara, “Receiving Gifts in Ecumenical Dialogue,” in Murray, *Receptive* pp. 26-38. See also the chapters by Riccardo Larini (7), Keith Pickler (8), Michael Putney (9), William Rusch (11), James Puglisi (13), Mary Tanner (18).

¹³ Ladislav Orsy, S.J. “Authentic Learning and Receiving—A Search for Criteria,” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 45.

¹⁴ Paul Murray, “Establishing the Agenda,” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 14.

The churches have not kept pace with their official and formal bilateral and multilateral agreed statements, too many of which lie dormant on the desks of ecumenical officers, archives and libraries. After nearly half a century, not enough of these agreed statements have been formally received, let alone received as ecumenical learning. This is discouragingly clear to us all. I agree with Mary Tanner that it is not the dialogues that have failed—they have, on the whole, been quite successful—but rather the process of reception has been the stumbling block.¹⁵ And yet within this context the *Eighth Report* of the JWG says,

If the agreements reached through ecumenical dialogue are to have an impact on the life and witness of the churches and lead to a new stage of communion, then careful attention needs to be paid to processes for receiving the agreements so that the whole community might be involved in the process of discernment.¹⁶

Take note as we gather in early 2009 that during the past year there has been an unprecedented energy within the churches for moving ahead with the project of receiving the agreed statements. This is a new development since 2006. For instance, the PCPCU is undertaking a careful study of the dialogues between the Catholic Church and its Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed ecumenical partners. The harvesting of the results of these dialogues, the “Succoth Project,” is a significant instance of reception that received unqualified support from Pope Benedict XVI on 12 December 2008 at the plenary assembly of the PCPCU with its theme “The Reception and Future of Ecumenical Dialogue.” The Holy Father stated: “Without a doubt, theological dialogue constitutes an essential ingredient for re-establishing the full communion that we all aspire to and, therefore, it must be sustained and encouraged. This dialogue is developed more in the context of ecclesial relations that ... broaden it and involve not only pastors but the entire People of God.”¹⁷

The Ninth Session of the Joint Working Group of the Catholic Church and the WCC has made Reception one of its two study projects from 2008 to 2013, the other being Spiritual Ecumenism. That such a senior and multilateral instrument brings both Ecumenical Reception and Spiritual Ecumenism together as its central work is a significant indicator of the ecumenical sea-change with regards to reception.

At the Eight Forum on Bilateral Dialogue under the auspices of Faith and Order, in March of 2008 in Breklum, Germany, representatives of the bilateral dialogues promoted a similar vision of reception. The Breklum Statement says to the churches:

We believe that it would be profitable to keep in mind right from the beginning of any phase of dialogue the reception of its results. As each dialogue is in some way a “learning process,” each needs to consider how this learning process may be shared

¹⁵ Mary Tanner, “From Vatican II to Mississauga—Lessons in Receptive Ecumenical from the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue Process,” in Murray, *Receptive*, pp. 262 ff.

¹⁶ JWG, *Eighth Report*, p. 82.

¹⁷ VIS 081212 (365)

with the wider membership of the two communities involved.

Only an abiding commitment to the ecclesial reception of ecumenical texts can allow these statements of convergence or consensus to have a reconciling and transforming effect in the life of our churches.¹⁸

The Conference of Secretaries of the CWCs, gathering under the auspices of the WCC, has expressed gratitude and interest in the Breklum Statement with its recommendation on reception. The secretaries of the CWCs, including the PCPCU, are in a strategic position to promote the cause of Ecumenical Reception.

Lastly, and a little closer to home, a recent Anglican example of the significance of reception is found in the resolutions of the December 2008 meeting of the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Ecumenical Relations. The resolution on “Reception in the Anglican Communion: Responding responsibly to Anglican and ecumenical developments” says:

4. The evaluation of developments in the life of the Christian Church and of ecumenical texts belongs within the broad process of ‘reception’, which is a spiritual process, one requiring the gifts of empathy and discernment. Reception is primarily about ‘receiving one another as God in Christ has received you’ (Romans 15.7)—the mutual reception of Christians, of Christian traditions and of Christian Churches. Receptive ecumenism [note the expression!] is a key to ecumenical progress, especially in theological dialogue. Reception of developments in the Church’s life belongs within the Church’s life of word and sacrament and needs to be practiced in communion. The concept of reception does not contain any presumption that the development or text will prove acceptable; ‘reception’ is not a value judgement, either positive or negative.
5. Within the overall, ongoing, diffused process of reception, a guided process of formal reception and discernment is sometimes required. This is needed particularly when developments or texts demand to be critically evaluated for the well being of the Church.¹⁹

There are many places where the IAS CER resolution resonates with Receptive Ecumenism—it even uses the term. Yet it also insists on the place of the reception of the agreed statements.

In short, in the space of a year within the influential spheres of the Bishop of Rome, the PCPCU, the Joint Working Group, Faith and Order and the Bilateral Forum, the CWCs and the WCC, and at least within the Anglican Communion amongst the CWCs, there is a convergence of momentum for the reception of the agreed statements of the multilateral and bilateral dialogues.

¹⁸ “The Breklum Statement” of the Ninth Forum on Bilateral Dialogue, Recommendation 2, <http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/breklum-statement.pdf>

¹⁹ IAS CER 2008, 15.xii.08 (Publication on the Anglican Communion Office website pending.)

There are direct connections between these various expressions of support for Ecumenical Reception: the initiatives of the PCPCU were brought to the JWG last January in Rome, where it captured the imagination of its members. Some members of the JWG were also members of the Forum on Bilateral Dialogues where it was picked up again, and from there to the Conference of Secretaries of the CWCs. Two of the Anglican members present were members of IASCER. Quite a number of the people involved in one or more of these instruments of Christian unity were present at the 2006 conference on Receptive Ecumenism, and are present here tonight. I have to wonder about the extent to which the prevailing winds of this ecclesial sea-change owe something to Receptive Ecumenism; Don Bolen and those close to Cardinal Kasper would be the ones to ask. I think it is significant that Don in his article signals that the theological dialogues are instances of ecumenical learning and find their place within the ethics of Receptive Ecumenism.²⁰

The vision of Ecumenical Reception now bears a remarkable likeness to the insights of the 2006 conference on Receptive Ecumenism. Reception does not mean mere canonical approval or approbation, but serious multileveled engagement. The aim of such formal reception is not merely doctrinal, but as the Breklum Statement suggests, enables the convergence or consensus statements to have a reconciling and transforming effect in the life of our churches. Or, in the language of the JWG: “to have an impact on the life and witness of the churches and lead to a new stage of communion.”

Receptive Ecumenism, Spiritual Ecumenism and Ecumenical Reception are not different, conflicting, or competing options,²¹ but authentic, interdependent and necessary expressions of the same reality. At this juncture in history, the aims and energy of Receptive Ecumenism and Ecumenical Reception reach a convergence. My question to this gathering: can the Receptive Ecumenism movement identify in fresh ways the reception of agreed statements as a vital case of ecumenical learning? If the answer is unclear or negative, then I return to my earlier anxieties about whether or not Receptive Ecumenism is the soft option, however refreshing and renewing. If the answer is yes, then I believe that the Holy Spirit will use Receptive Ecumenism to move the Ecumenical Movement not just from winter to spring and the “buds of Lenten roses,” but to the verdant pastures and still waters of an early ecumenical summer.

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²⁰ Donald Bolen, “Receptive Ecumenism and Recent Initiatives in the Catholic Church’s Dialogues with the Anglican Communion and the World Methodist Council,” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 276.

²¹ As seems to be suggested by Paul Murray in his article, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning—Establishing the Agenda,” in Murray, *Receptive*, p. 14.