

I will make an observation <about the Receptive Ecumenism Conference> as a Faith and Order staff member in Geneva.

Receptive Ecumenism, according to papers of the 2006 conference and of the present one, has been unfolded as a recapture of the classical Faith and Order theology for which the visible unity of the church remains the ultimate goal and on the way towards this goal it harvests from an exchange of gifts between actors, individuals as well as churches.

Reception lies at the very heart of ecumenical encounters: of dialogues, of agreements, of common witness and experience. Reception has been a blessing and a stumbling block of ecumenical movement at the same time.

Receptive Ecumenism Conference this year tackles the issue of the obstacles on the way to the unity of the church from the ecclesiological point of view, namely from the issue of church local and universal, diverse and one.

As theologians we are used to believe that Unity and Diversity is a purely trinitarian issue: one in three and three in one. Diversity has become today one of the central issues of the civil society. We hear more and more about pluralistic societies, about threat of terrorism, all to deal with the issue of diversity in the first place. Human beings have never been exposed to diversity in the same manner as it occurs now.

Where does Receptive Ecumenism place the problem of Diversity? Is it a problem of the church universal or of the church local? Let us say, that Learning starts in a local church, in its Orthodox/Catholic or Protestant understanding. It starts in a parish, in a diocese, in a local ecumenical council so that an obvious target for Learning is a local church.

The church universal has also to learn a great deal. From different approaches to Local-Universal, which we heard in four presentations here, at this conference in Durham; we learned that all churches, apart from the Roman Catholic Church, struggle with the fact of not having universal ecclesial structures, which manifests itself in a local church as well as ecumenically, even if these traditions consider not exercising universal primacy as their advantage. So much has to be learned at the universal level, as it was mentioned in discussions.

The Receptive Ecumenism Project seems very widely set in terms of the church traditions, disciplines, age, gender, ordained and lay. Diversity of data from its activities will be drawn together through the ecclesiological lenses, we heard, and will feed back the diverse actors of the Project so that they will have an opportunity to receive each other's 'gifts' with grace. Here one may easily identify a link with Mission which, according to few speakers has been missing in Receptive Ecumenism Project.

Learning 'how to learn together' and what to make out of this wisdom will give an opportunity to actors of this exercise to address the world, the others inside and outside of the churches. The project will give an opportunity to the 'superb governance' of churches in Britain to improve their strategy and Mission.

The learning, discernment and conversion are characteristic of any reception process. To echo Paul Murray's reflection, 'can we give up on economic justice?' Can we give up on learning? Can we give up on visible unity of the church?

Apart from Learning, in my view, Receptive Ecumenism is also about awakening the ecumenical consciousness, where are we now in relation to the goal of visible unity.

The time is right, the legitimacy of such a proposal is not called into question. What remains to be answered is how? How do we actually commit ourselves to a meaningful exchange of gifts? Will it happen through a covenant? Will it happen through making ourselves accountable to one another?

A good question was raised in the plenary about 'giftedness' of gifts: how can actors of the exchange process acknowledge the same gift? Exchange is a complex process not only between many but also between two partners.

Some practical suggestions:

Receptive Ecumenism Project will benefit if it becomes known to a wider ecumenical constituency and the latter will also glean considerable wisdom from this Learning process. One of the concrete ways will be to inform Faith and Order Plenary Commission (which is the largest theological forum comprising of 120 members appointed by the churches) about Receptive Ecumenism. This Commission is responsible for ecclesiological documents like Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry or The Nature and Mission of the Church. The Commission will learn or refresh its memory about the 'exchange' and 'reception' but also will have an opportunity to act upon this Learning.

We invite Paul Murray to write a synopsis of the Project for the Commission which meets in October 2009.