

## **DIFFERENCE, DIVISION AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY**

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It is a pleasure to speak to members of “We Are Church”. You have taken on a noble, though sometimes frustrating, vocation. From my own experience I suspect that you are sometimes discouraged by the feeling that you are making so little progress in trying to bring about a reformed church, and I want to say something that might help you to live positively with that feeling. The first thing is to remember that we are entering on a task the success of which depends primarily on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who never forces the pace is infinitely patient and works unobserved. We don’t always see what is going on behind the scene in our efforts. Faith is needed if we are to trust that the Holy Spirit is active even when we are feeling tired, disappointed and discouraged. The fact is that in the Roman Catholic Church things don’t happen quickly, especially when the forces of government are not in favour of what we are striving for. There are a few reasons for this, most of them due to a resistance to change. We don’t even have a shared Eucharist yet, though many of us act unofficially! Those of us who have lived in the pre-Vatican Council church will remember how used we were to changelessness being presented as a virtue. That the Catholic Church was the only true church and never changes was one of our strongest convictions. Or so we were taught.

Then came Vatican II, with its various reforming documents, especially its Decree on Ecumenism, and we recognised that we had to change if we were to enter the modern world and the quest for church unity. Some senior prelates found that Vatican II was asking too much of them. That there is no reform without repentance can be a hard lesson to learn when you are convinced that you belong to the one true church. Not every Catholic welcomed Vatican II. The majority of us did, and rejoiced in the prospect of badly-needed reforms. The 1960s were an exciting time for most of us.

But not for all. The traditionalist challenge took some time to emerge into public view. It is very evident now, and it poses a problem for Catholics; though our leaders and teachers never seem to mention it. Traditionalism can have many different meanings. I am talking about what is going on among high-ranking churchmen –

cardinals, archbishops and other senior clergy who are trying to discredit Pope Francis at every turn. For most Catholics they are clearly beyond the pale for this. They were a disturbingly large body of men, but Pope Francis' appointments are gradually reducing their numbers. Then there are bishops like those in Ireland, England and Scotland who for the most part try to keep out of trouble by rarely saying anything that might disturb the Roman Curia. Since I will mention the Roman Curia unfavourably a few times, I must ask you to remember that some of its members are good and support Pope Francis. However, some of the more powerful are dedicated to obstruction of all reform. I believe that we must stand up to them: they could force a severe division in the church and they could even set up a schismatic church.

In the end, we can take attitudes to the Second Vatican Council as the defining issue in a search for standards in church life and faith today. Bodies like 'We Are Church', and the 'Association of Catholic Priests', who are holding out for a reformed church, tend to be thought of by bishops as 'trouble-makers'. This is truly tragic in an age of extensive unbelief, when leaders in our church ought to be in dialogue with people like you, giving encouragement in a challenging world.

On the occasion of my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday the editor of the Catholic journal, The Tablet, invited me to write a piece reflecting on my life as a theologian. It proved to be a fascinating experience for me, one through which I learned something unsuspectedly important about myself and my past. I discovered that my study of Modernism has had a far deeper effect on my theology and spirituality than I had realised. The Modernists had been saying things that made a lot of sense to me. Yet they were vilified by men who persecuted them and treated them like outcasts. It is vitally important that hard traditionalists never come to power in the church today.

I want to impress on you that what happens in theology affects every member of the church in some way. In a heavily clerical church, priests are taught theology which influences their entire ministry. The Second Vatican Council changed the life of the Catholic Church in many different ways, some of which were obvious, like the vernacular at Mass; and some of which were unseen, but had a deep effect on how the Church thought and behaved. [cf. the Irish bishop]

Modernism was a movement that flourished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and

the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It was suppressed ruthlessly by Pope Pius X in 1907. Anti-modernism became a powerful atmosphere in Catholic Church life, as I discovered when I began to study theology in Rome at the Gregorian University in 1947 and I heard my teachers speak of the dangers of Modernism. Like most Catholics at that time, I had little or no understanding of the issues involved. After I had completed my primary theological studies in Rome, I became really interested in Modernism.

I was intrigued by what I thought must have been a sensationally dangerous movement to have drawn down on itself such a fierce denunciation, and I was determined to research it in depth. The book which resulted from my research, and which was published by Oxford University Press, is now out of print. I mention it here merely to show that my research was carried out in an academic and responsible way, and is not merely the opinions of a so-called liberal theologian. My research showed me that the Modernists were a small group of Catholic scholars trying to face the challenges thrown up by the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement beginning in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and providing the modern world with philosophies that were hostile to religion. The official Catholic line was to condemn the movement utterly and to set up canonical threats, like that of heresy, against it. This was commonplace in the Catholic Church at that time. The Curia had enough raw power to act unjustly by censoring writings and acting as judge, jury and executioner. However, there were few voices raised in protest. In those days one did not protest against what the Catholic Church was doing, if one wanted to remain in the church.

The Modernists turned out to be a small group of Catholic theologians, philosophers, and biblical scholars who thought that Christian faith and life had to be defended properly, not by condemnation but by dialogue and argument. The conservative defenders of Catholic faith turned to medieval theologians, principally St. Thomas Aquinas, for their approach to modern theology. The primary reason for this was that Pope Leo XIII had made neo-scholasticism more or less obligatory for orthodox Catholic scholars; and neo-scholasticism, which is a philosophy marked by metaphysical abstractions, quickly became the language and philosophy of Catholic orthodoxy. Church politicians, papal and episcopal, seized the opportunity to make neo-Thomism mandatory for all Catholic theologians. The very notion of diversity was

unthinkable. One left that sort of thing to Anglicans.

Leo's successor, Pius X, who was a much more pugnacious character than Leo, cast aside any gentleness and decided that Modernism was "the meeting-place of all the heresies". This was so obviously untrue and unjust that in my article for the Tablet I didn't mince my words when I wrote that describing Modernism as the meeting place of all the heresies was "one of the silliest and most unjust judgments ever made about a responsible group of scholars by their fellow Catholics". Strong words, I concede, but accurate.

The phrase "the meeting-place of all the heresies" occurs in the papal encyclical "Pascendi Dominici Gregis" of 1907. I have examined the encyclical line by line. Papal encyclicals are normally drafted by an anonymous author. Pascendi was drafted by a French Oblate priest named Joseph Lemius. Lemius produced a text that basically adopted the hard-line anti-modernist position, but expressed it in balanced and unemotional language. I carefully compared Lemius' text with the encyclical itself. What I found was that the argument in the encyclical was substantially that drafted by the French Oblate, but it was intensified and emotionalised by the Pope. To be very blunt, Pius X can be fairly described as a zealot with little theological skill who decided to make anti-modernism his life's work. In the course of my article for the Tablet I freely expressed my real thoughts about Pius's words when he wrote that Modernism was the meeting-place of all the heresies. This was a flagrant abuse of power allied to a serious defect in theological knowledge and skill. In 1954 Pius X was canonised – which perhaps says something about canonisation! I realise that my view of Pius and Modernism is my own. I could never have expressed it before the Second Vatican Council.

In the week following my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday a missionary priest wrote to the Tablet of his shock that a Catholic theologian should write about a pope actually using the term "silliest" about a papal document. I can fully understand his attitude, which was once commonplace in Catholic discourse at the time. Cut off, as he was, from developments in theology over recent years, he thought my words, were disrespectful. Today most of us, influenced by Pope Francis, regard the pope as a fellow Catholic elected by cardinals to head the Church, not as a prince but as someone who regards his position as a

service to his church. Let me quote the last paragraph of the scandalised priest in the Tablet:

I am a simple missionary priest who spent over 40 years in the African bush, but I still think that what the Pope says should be treated with respect. 'Tu es Petrus'.

In short he believes that the pope is a sacred person. I see no point in commenting adversely on a priest who has plainly been working away from the theological atmosphere of the post-Vatican II church. 60 years ago I would have shared his views, for I knew no better. Today we tend to think that truth is more important than ecclesiastical propriety. My view of Pius X is based on a careful study of him and the effect he had on the Church. Thank God, popes differ from each other!

The Modernists were not a group of dangerous people intent on overthrowing the Catholic faith as Pope Pius X had depicted them. They were a group of honest and learned scholars who were treated outrageously by a pope who was theologically deficient and convinced that he was protecting people from heretics who were a threat to the Catholic Church. They were in truth only trying to bring the Catholic Church into the modern world – which the Second Vatican Council eventually did.

There is a sentence in the First Letter of Peter, chapter 3 verse 15 which is pretty central to the Christian Gospel: "always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect". We should be able to show that there are intelligent reasons for what we believe, but only when the questioner is sincere and is prepared to listen to what you have to say. Sometimes today we may find that people we know who ask us "why do you hang on to all that religion stuff"? If we attempt to give an intelligent answer, they may simply change the subject. It wasn't a question of any depth or sincerity for them. They were asking you why you are not like them, free from what they see as the shackles of religion. Their unbelief is probably as superficial as their belief was.

It would, of course, be different if the question was a serious one. Then, you should be able to say briefly what you believe and why you believe it, and add that your approach to religion is not purely social; it is a serious search for meaning in life, and that meaning would not be possible without God.

Let's now have a look at the word 'liberal' which is so often used by conservatives as a term of abuse, as if being liberal was a fault or defect. The word itself has many possible meanings, all of them having some reference to 'liber', the Latin for 'free'. It needs a context for full meaning. I propose to use it here as a refusal to be shackled by people who see church life in terms of rules and regulations, and hostility to change (and consequently hostility to reform). Today such people are known as 'traditionalists'. The word has been used in many different contexts in history. Its main characteristics in a Catholic context today are resistance to any change in doctrine, morality, politics, and often a tendency to enforce its views by canon law and curial activity. Any disagreement with traditionalism can be described as 'liberal', and it should be worn as a badge of honour. The Second Vatican Council was a 'liberal' council - which is why many traditionalists dislike it so much. It is sad that many Catholics underestimate the radical nature of what happened at Vatican II. Traditionalists try to encourage this failure in every way possible, because of the changes it brought about in the Catholic Church. They like to say that the 'church never changes'. Of course it changes, as Vatican II made abundantly clear. Catholic liberals are simply those who seek freedom from so many of the rules and regulations that marked the pre-conciliar church, and which today mark the devotion which traditionalists bestow on authority, regulations and punishments.

So much for the word 'liberal'. What about 'Protestant'? The proper response to the accusation of being Protestant, I suggest, is 'yes, and what about it?' The Reformation was far more than a rebellion that destroyed the unity of western Christianity. As Martin Luther saw so clearly, the Reformation was the response to an atmosphere of grave superstition calling out for reform of such matters as the sale of indulgences, the perverted use of relics, and a large-scale dependence on human effort to achieve salvation, sometimes by scandalously superstitious.

Today there is agreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on 'justification', which was so important for Martin Luther. Justification is the technical word for God's act of declaring or making a sinner righteous before God. Luther said that we are not made righteous by doing things to win God's favour. We are made righteous by faith alone. Good works follow from this faith. This was the central

teaching of the Reformation, and there is no good reason why Catholics should not share it. The pity is that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholics, from the pope down, were intent on finding as many differences as they could between Catholicism and Protestantism. Thank God, that day has gone.

The Catholic Church is God-intended, Spirit-guided, but man-made. It will always have blemishes and imperfections, and that is why it is always in need of forgiveness. Church it may be, but its members show all the imperfections and waywardness of any human being or human society.

In the Communion Rite of Mass we pray: “Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church”. I like to amend this prayer very slightly : “Look not on the sin but on the faith of your Church”. The Church is both sinful and holy. This prayer reminds me of a perceptive remark of Blaise Pascal, the French mystic and scientist: “Man is the glory and the scandal of the universe.” Pascal was able to keep in mind the two seemingly contradictory realities ‘glory’ and ‘scandal’ to give a perfectly accurate description of human beings. We build hospitals; and we build concentration camps. Pascal not unreasonably remarks: “we are a mystery to ourselves”. We have this tendency to create an antithesis between good and evil which makes each exclusive of the other – which may work in the abstract but not in the personal or social. The church is both holy and sinful. Conservatives like to dwell on the holiness and are uncomfortable with describing the church as sinful – which is arguably the main reason why bishops and religious superiors failed so egregiously to speak out on clerical paedophilia. They put the good name of the church before the plight of victims.

It is the human element in the church that is always in need of reform. The divine element is constant and untouched by human hand. When we speak of the church being sinful or in need of reform, it is, of course, the human element we mean. Reform of the church is necessary so that the divine may shine more brightly and inspire more effectively. It is vitally important that the sinful element in the church should never be sacralised or made the object of veneration. Renaissance popes were often morally and religiously deficient, but nobody seemed to be worried about the office that was the unquestioned scene of the deficiencies. Few people questioned a pope who was a secular prince as well as being the chief executive of the man who had

nowhere to lay his head and who died at the hands of a Roman politician, egged on by a group of leaders of his own religion.

Pope Francis has renounced all the princely prerogatives of his office and the traditionally sacred characteristics of his person. Francis also recognises that it is high time that his Curia learned to do likewise and he has addressed them bluntly to this effect. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith needs to renounce its pretentiousness and its abuse of authority. Its members can be a blight on how the church is being governed.

I have been considering difference and division. In conclusion let me now say something about the acceptance of diversity within unity. This should be the aim of every Christian society. It has an obvious ecumenical connection. The clear aim of ecumenism is the pursuit of unity between, say, two churches whose theologians meet to find what theological points they can agree on. Great progress has been achieved and enshrined in their agreed statements which critically examine doctrinal differences, and in theory produce a document that sometimes reaches startling agreement on beliefs of every kind. All seems set for the achievement of unity between two churches, one of which is Roman Catholic. Yet, nothing seems to happen on the Catholic side! Why is this?

The way in which the Catholic Church has been organised for centuries allows a group of bureaucrats in Rome to express their disagreement with an agreed statement by doing nothing, in other words, in an act of passive aggression. They offer no convincing theological reasons for their opposition. Their theology is pre-Vatican II, except that they are in rebellion against the present Pope. They are exercising their power as they were able to do in former times, and even under recent popes like John Paul II and Benedict XVI. But Pope Francis has very different ideas about how his curia should work, and he has been quite clear in his speeches to them about it. He is aware of how many of his curia are working against him – and getting away with it.

In this connection I would like to mention a theologian whom I have greatly admired, John Macquarrie, who was born in Scotland of Presbyterian parents and who went to teach theology in the U.S.A. While there, he entered the Anglican



Church. He returned and took up a prestigious professorship in Oxford University and rapidly became widely respected as Britain's finest Anglican theologian. He was a dedicated ecumenist. However, here is a sentence he wrote about ecumenism that may surprise you and deserves careful attention, it lies at the heart of what I have been saying to you this evening:

"The genuine diversity in unity of the body of Christ needs to be defended against uniformity just as much as against divisiveness".

This was a gentle criticism of those ecumenists who concentrate on unity at the expense of legitimate freedom to differ within the confines of Christian faith. Unity is frequently confused with uniformity. Macquarrie points out that we need to pay attention to the meaning and qualities of that unity. There was no diversity about the Catholic idea of unity in the pre-conciliar period. Diversity, I am sorry to say, is not a virtue characteristically valued by the Catholic Church.

Macquarrie also faced up to a real, sometimes an agonising, problem: Are there limits to diversity? There are, of course. Everything, however, depends on how narrowly or how generously the limits are drawn. We too easily forget how the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council believed that it was the only true church, and it had absolutely no doubts about the correctness of its rules and dogmas. With this view there could obviously be no ecumenical progress whatever. Let me quote from Macquarrie's book, *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity*:

"The real evil of division is not diversity but the bitterness and lovelessness to which it can lead, and this can happen within a single church structure as well as between denominations. At the present time, for instance, while the bitterness of denominational differences has receded to almost negligible proportions, new divisions have arisen that spread through all the denominations. The Roman Catholic Church is experiencing an acute tension between progressive and conservative elements, and the same kind of polarization is to be found in other Christian churches."

Macquarrie was a liberal in the best sense of the word. He saw the danger of being so set on church unity that important differences could be lost. Any church, denominational or united, needs diversity within its unity. The mere reciting of the creeds as statements of what Christians believe does not amount to Christian faith.

There has to be existential involvement in the living out of what we say we believe. Different points of view and emphasis are necessary in a healthy church. As an ecumenist I must strive personally to be aware of the good and the true that may be in opinions I disagree with. It is not always easy to do this, as you, no doubt, know well. As John Macquarrie pointed out, there is in the Catholic Church 'an acute tension between progressive and conservative elements'. For some strange reason our bishops rarely, if ever, refer publically to this division; yet it is a pastorally urgent and sensitive problem in today's Catholic Church.

There are, in my view, divisions that cannot be accommodated within the one unity. I don't take this position lightly. In every church there are conservative and progressive elements, and they must, in accordance with the Gospel, learn to live together in harmony in spite of their differences and disagreements.

I find myself in real difficulties in my attitude to today's high-ranking traditionalists. I believe they must be opposed for the sake of preserving Gospel values. I am convinced that they are doing serious harm to the Catholic Church by their emphasis on rules and regulations and sacramental punishments; but can they be tolerated because their views are legitimate, though wrong-headed? The answer is that as long as their views are held without any attempt to use power-structures to produce uniformity, as the Roman Curia have so often done, they have a right to hold and argue for them; and progressives have a right to argue against them - but always "with gentleness and respect", as 1 Peter prescribes.