

ST EDMUND'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

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EDMUND OF ABINGDON:

It is my privilege to share in your worship this evening as one whose pastoral ministry has been exercised in a situation where much of what Edmund of Abingdon, the theologian, the pastor and the diplomat would have found to say the least of it, challenging. I come to you as a pastor and the insights I share are pastoral. Northern Ireland for the past 25 years has at once presented a challenge and a dilemma for Christendom. The years of violence have so frequently been portrayed in terms of some sort of religious war. Yet the complexities of that picture demand so much more than such a simplistic impression. This evening we have had more than a year of a fragile peace. In the spirit of St Edmund I come to reflect with you on the challenge of these times for all who call themselves Christian. For I am a convinced ecumenist working in a place where ecumenism is for too many a term of weakness, even surrender. What can we learn from the experiences of Northern Ireland about the real nature of ecumenism today? Dare I express the hope that my reflections may be of some interest to you in your pilgrimage here.

THE IRISH SCENE:

Ireland has not always reflected developments elsewhere in ecumenism. This has been as true in the sense of achievements as well as disappointments. Not for the first time we are aware that in some things the Irish **'do it their own way'**. Yet on one point we shall surely find universal agreement : nowhere are the implications of closer ties between the Churches more desirable, nowhere is the highest level of communion between Christians, and nowhere are the consequences of religious division more important than on that island. Ireland must be numbered among those tragic areas in which we have seen the dramatic human consequences of divisions for which religious labels provide some sort of identity. The last 25 years are there for all to see. The degrees to which responsibility for those years of suffering lie at the door of our Churches will provoke debate for generations. For the present let us at least agree that there is a strong religious dimension to Ireland's problems. Let us also acknowledge that pressures, conditions and events outside matters ecclesiastical have had their effect on the life of the Church in Ireland and that those influences have been largely negative.

There are two factors I feel we must acknowledge as important to the ecumenical scene in Ireland.

First, while they must be viewed as inter-related, there is a clear distinction between inter-faith co-operation and understanding and the ultimate vision of Church unity. Second, community

relations in Ireland but particularly in the north and during the past half century have underlined the close proximity of religious identity and party political allegiance. Separately those factors are important - taken together they illustrate the dilemmas and the pressures which give ecumenism in Ireland its unique nature. They also emphasise the urgent need for a vision for Irish ecumenism.

Distinction:

I feel therefore it is important to state quite honestly that there is a distinction between co-operation and the ultimate goal of Church unity in the Irish perspective.

For those who conclude that the turmoil of Irish history represents a religious conflict between two traditions the degree of co-operation and understanding which has emerged on this island is remarkable. Within Northern Ireland given the conflict, suspicion and tensions reflected between two communities which have each their own religious/political identity crisis it is nothing less than remarkable that today we can experience inter-Church co-operation of a quality which is unmatched in many other countries. When I relate abroad the details of what is in fact possible in Ireland there is surprise - even amazement.

A 'Religious War':

Behind the smokescreen of all the suffering and the violence of a quarter century much has been happening which challenges the concept of a sort of 'holy war.'

But there has been and is a religious dimension to our conflict. For that reason any degree of inter-Church co-operation, any degree of greater inter-Church understanding must be a positive process. Against a background of division which has allowed sectarian violence to flourish, any steps towards reconciliation must be essential and necessary. To attempt a simple list of those steps towards greater understanding, to mention the many examples of **'on the ground'** co-operation between Churches or to relate the many ways in which Churches of the Protestant and the Roman Catholic traditions have come to understand each other in the Irish context is to embark on a task which will inevitably omit something of importance. But when one considers the yearly meeting of what was originally described as the Ballymascanlon Inter-Church Conference, the annual ecumenical meetings up and down the country, the joint witness of the Four Church leaders, the growth of area ecumenical occasions, the advance in pastoral guidelines of inter-Church marriages, the witness of Corrymeela, the formation of the St Columbanus Community in Belfast, the establishment of Youth Link as an inter-church youth agency, the active co-operation in the field of hospital or prison chaplaincies, in the whole field of religious education in schools, Glenstal, Greenhills and the Belfast Cathedral/Benburb Conferences, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Women's World Day of Prayer, the immense significance of the Irish School of Ecumenics, a project which has the potential for influence and understanding of a high degree, those many public events when it would now be unthinkable for an ecumenical presence to be absent - one begins to realise the richness of what is now possible. This is not to ignore the opportunities for such joint witness still to be seized. Yet let no one doubt we have come a very long way in obvious and not so obvious ways to show that such co-operation is possible and indeed desirable. I have sometimes

described this growth as a "tender plant". I continue to hold that view. But we are thankful to God for what has been achieved already.

The Troubles:

When the recent Troubles erupted in 1969 most if not all of the main Churches found themselves reacting with much of the rest of northern society to a situation which was as incomprehensible as it was frightening. The Churches of 1969 acted as a social ambulance service and we reflected the needs, the incomprehension and the identity of our own communities. We became a voice for that apprehension. We became victims of the political/religious identity crisis and we tended to adopt a partisan and sectional stance. As the years have passed the pastoral needs of so many tragic situations have forced us to see the common denominator of what was happening to too many lives. We have developed what I call a '**joint theology of the instantaneous**'. Whether we are still too close to the events of the past quarter of a century to see it or not, the violence has at the one and same time driven wedges real or imagined between Christians - but it has also driven them together. That is the significant dichotomy of the Troubles. Much of the sectarian violence was designed to divide people. At times and as a result of particular incidents it did so. But equally so the longer term reaction to events has forged links between Christians. It has compelled intense heart-searching about the nature of Christian witness. It has compelled self-examination about the cost of discipleship. It drove Churches to see that the tears and grief of a Protestant home were no different to those of a Roman Catholic family. It also drove us to see the desperate need to adopt the Christian stance on community ills

rather than the denominational. Slowly but surely we began to recognise the need to oppose violence, to condemn it and to work to remove it no matter its source. The result has been that in the past few years or so there has developed a much more united Christian voice from the Churches which has learned to speak as much of injustice in the experience of others as it had addressed perceived or real injustice for "our own people." The Christian vision of the just, reconciled and peaceful society has now become the authentic voice of the Irish Churches. There is a new integrity in our public utterances. If twenty-five years of suffering has in fact been our Calvary experience - we may just be beginning to sense our Easter message.

Reconciliation:

The great in-word of our times in Ireland is 'reconciliation'. Like all great words it is the source of multiple interpretation. Like all banner headlines it is subject to individual definition. For the Christian it has as much to say about the theological as the practical. Reconciliation of man to God is a Biblical imperative. Reconciliation within a community is a process rather than a fact : a journey rather than an arrival. In Irish terms the idea of community has to encompass a wide spectrum of faith values, political loyalties and cultural traditions. We have seen in our own lifetime that it is when one set of faith values or a political loyalty however expressed and cultural tradition becomes the only or exclusive norm of identity that community is destroyed and relationships ruptured. Surely the Biblical imperative translated into human relationships is the call to create and build up an inclusive yet diverse community. Reconciliation in Ireland is as important for what it is **not** as for

what it is. It is not about losing one's tradition for the sake of uniformity. It does not require differences to disappear so that we may experience peace or community. Reconciliation is the achievement of an acceptance of unity in diversity - the acceptance of creative, positive experience of difference. It is relating where different expressions of faith, political allegiances and cultural traditions are not only necessary - but are creatively accommodated and welcomed. Without such a vision Ireland will never enjoy an authentic community of value nor achieve a people who will not be impoverished.

Such is the tapestry before which and in which Irish Church life exists : not in a vacuum but facing the need to have a theology, to worship and to witness within the actual experiences of a diverse people. The Irish Churches can either enhance the quality of community or diminish it. Despite the growth of secularism and secular attitudes in Ireland Churches do have influence on opinion. But that influence itself can either encourage exclusivity or inclusivity : build walls or open doors.

Such considerations can never be omitted from any consideration of ecumenism in Ireland. What we can attempt together more than what for the sake of conscience we must do separately remains the real criteria for inter-Church attitudes to reconciliation and the building up of the just, compassionate and charitable society. Yet the difficulties we face in this whole area are clearly visible. There are many in Northern Ireland who see joint Church witness and action as a danger, an ambiguity and something of surrender of principle. Fundamentalism, political ideology and extremist views continue to challenge those who want to see joint action and witness as it also opposes the whole concept of ecumenism. Fundamentalism is present not only in particular

sects, it is evidenced in attitudes within the main denominations. Even to talk of reconciliation within some of the Churches of the reformed tradition in Northern Ireland and even when that process is given a Biblical basis, is to invite condemnation and talk of something like a "sell out".

Sectarianism:

Sectarianism as we experience it in Northern Ireland is an emotion of depth, subtlety and inherent danger. At the Irish Inter-Church Meeting as far back as 1987 together with the late Cardinal O'Fiaich, I suggested that the Churches needed to examine closely the lethal toxin of sectarianism. This suggestion produced the Report of the Inter-Church working party on sectarianism in 1993. Words from that document leave us in no doubt as to the urgency of the problem :

"Sectarianism is a disease in any society : that it exists within our own diminishes us as a Christian people."

Many aspects of the current peace process itself could still fail if sectarianism is not faced for what it is. The "us" and "them" syndrome is a part of daily experience. As long as it endures there will be obstacles to reconciliation. Sectarianism is still the greatest challenge to joint Church action and the greatest problem for the Churches in Ireland, north and south. We have yet to understand how deep it lies in the consciousness of people - we have yet to really face up to ways of countering it. Too many people in Northern Ireland when asked what they believe will reply in generalities about a religious/party political stance

before they will even address what their religious tradition teaches. The perception that Protestantism in Northern Ireland must inevitably carry a political connotation of unionism and that Roman Catholicism in Northern Ireland carries the identity of nationalism or republicanism has resulted in a morass of problems when we try to distinguish political and religious identities. Such is something of the problem still facing us.

Distinction Remains:

It is vital to underline that in Ireland as elsewhere co-operation between the Churches - no matter how developed - is no substitute for that unity for which Christ prayed. Such practical co-operation is a definite step in the right direction. But it is no substitute for the new Jerusalem to which Christianity is committed in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Too often good people of faith can and do make the mistake of substituting the one for the other. It is as though satisfaction at what has been possible in one becomes a substitute for even contemplating the greater goal. This can never be allowed to be the case. Whether we like it or not it is far from being the "either/or" situation. I fear we in Ireland have been guilty of substitution. The pressure of events within this island have been such that we too easily lose sight of the greater goal.

On the second of October 1989 Pope John Paul II and the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, issued a Common Declaration. It contained the following words:

"Against the background of human disunity the arduous journey to Christian unity must be pursued with determination and vigour, whatever obstacles are perceived to block the path. We have solemnly recommitted ourselves and those we represent to the restoration of visible unity and full ecclesiastical communion in the confidence that to seek anything less would be to betray our Lord's intention for the unity of His people."

They also declared:

"The ecumenical journey is not only about the removal of obstacles but also about the sharing of gifts."

Two key principles - anything less than full ecclesiastical communion is a betrayal of our Lord's will and the importance of sharing gifts.

As I view ecumenism in Ireland I find much to ponder in those sentiments for this reason. I believe that much which passes for ecumenical effort in Ireland is more geared to co-operation and understanding in the short-term than to the vision of full ecclesiastical communion in the long-term. I also believe that much of our co-operation falls short of a full embrace of the gifts we each possess.

It is surely significant that the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Communion and Women in the Episcopate which I was privileged to chair, the Joint Theological Working Party Report of the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland and other important inter-Church reports have taken as their theme a study of the word **KOINONIA** - communion or fellowship. As Clifford Longley rightly concluded in 'The Times' -

"A new meaning is being given to an important word in ecumenical relations. Instead of concentrating on differences, Christians are looking at the quality of their inner relationships, the bonds and commitments that hold them freely together and the criteria by which those relationships are to be conducted ... Koinonia ... is a concept that is beginning to be used with confidence. It is obviously a word with a future."

I have tried to describe the distinction I see between current ecumenical activity and the goal of ultimate Church unity. In one instance we speak from experience : in the other we continue to visualise the Gospel imperative of what is yet to be revealed. The real question remains how much of what we are doing together makes the path to ultimate unity easier or more difficult? Again we must ask how important is the dream of unity to us as we engage in inter-Church life? Given our differences and the ways we express them or ignore them I sometimes have to conclude that the ultimate dream is nothing more than a dream. For the sad yet challenging truth is that there is scant evidence of universal longing in Ireland for Church unity. Ecumenical activity and interest has become a sort of minority activity for the committed few. All too often denominationalism has suffocated the will as

well as the reality. At ecumenical gatherings I meet the same faces. I experience the same sentiments. Within that activity I sense the real danger that for some ecumenism has become its own **"religion"**. There is an urgent need in Ireland for those who are involved in ecumenical encounter to recognise that it is only when they bring real and definable knowledge of and commitment to their own tradition to that encounter that genuine sharing can take place. That is the **"sharing of gifts"** in a real manner of which Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Runcie spoke. We have long passed that early period when we talked of **"tea-cup ecumenism"**. Slowly but surely we have matured from simply being nice to each other to a point when real issues have been addressed. While they have been addressed in the atmosphere of high-level discussions many average worshippers view such debates as far removed from what is sometimes termed **"getting on with life at ground level."** Reports issued and recommendations made have not always been analysed by the Churches with the urgency or enthusiasm they deserve.

The point I am seeking to make is that communication and understanding of what is remarkably present in inter-Church relations is a major challenge for all our Churches. But is it only a question of communication? Does it not also indicate a lack of interest and a failure of our individual Church structures or authorities to educate?

Hard Questions:

It is a time for honesty. It is a time to be unafraid to ask the hard questions in Christian love. It is also a time to welcome hard questions directed at us by those we in turn seek to understand. Without great honesty, openness and yet sensitivity

for the feelings of others we will continue to languish in a sea of false tranquillity.

We need to ask about **attitudes** to each other as well as seeking to understand what is important to each other. We need to ask about power and influence by the Churches in Irish society, north and south. We need to ask about how that power and influence is used or exerted. We also need to ask what it is that really influences the attitudes of one Church to another. The language we use when we talk to each other, the perception we have of what lies behind that language and the nature of what we each perceive to be the agenda each Church is '**working from**' in ecumenical relations requires careful scrutiny.

In Northern Ireland where a majority of people would claim allegiance to one of the reformed traditions the need to recognise the rights and privileges of members of the Roman Catholic faith and to give protection to those rights is essential. Such a principle is interwoven in the nature of majority/minority relationships in a democracy. But the same principle must be applied to all majority/minority situations. Indeed it seems to me that the principle becomes even more important in situations such as that in the Republic where the majority/minority relationship is much more obvious. It raises questions about the ethos of a large majority population in relation to the equally important ethos of a small minority. In both north and south how the ethos and beliefs of a minority are treated will be the real criterion of the just and compassionate society. In the Republic I welcome so much evidence of ecumenical understanding and practice. But I also have to say that there must be a constant vigilance lest the desire for pluralism and how that desire is expressed in religious

language and practice becomes subordinated to any acknowledgement of the supremacy of one denominational view. For Ireland is really the story of two minorities. That story and that relationship holds the real key to many of our problems - it must also hold the key to real and genuine progress towards ecumenical understanding.

Secularism in Ireland:

Secularism has come of age in Ireland. Let none of us denude ourselves. The authority of the Church to express views on morals, ethics or public affairs no longer is unchallenged in the market place. Indeed we have moved beyond the period of constant challenge. I believe we are now in the next phase. We face growing **indifference**. There are many of the new generation who see little relevance in what any of the Irish Churches say about morality. This new generation of young people are asking questions about life and the reality of experience which are far removed from the protection of pulpit or sanctuary. It is not that they have lost a desire to find a faith that works. Rather it is that they are seeking and finding standards, principles and beliefs which they do not recognise in the words we Churchmen use. That is the real challenge the Irish Churches face. It is an uncomfortable fact for us to face. But fact it remains. Before such realities high-level discussions of theological niceties pale into insignificance. Ireland is changing. If the Churches wish to be a part of that change we will have to grasp new ways of meeting that challenge, of moving into new ways of expressing the **'faith once delivered'** in language and above all in practice which will have a new integrity, a new relevance and a **new authority : authority not based on perceived privilege, but authority because**

we seek it alone from Christ. I cannot visualise that new approach, that new anxiety to be relevant and urgent, on any other basis or platform than the ecumenical. Christianity may not be on trial in Ireland. The witness of Christians most certainly is.
