

Can We Talk?

By

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As I reflect on the recent troubles of the Anglican Communion - and our brother, Pope Benedict's recent response of inviting Anglicans to break with their communion and join the Roman Catholic Church - we are once again compelled to face the reality that church division and competition have always been major factors in the history of Christianity. Recall Paul's dismay with the factionalism of the Corinthians, "Is Christ divided? While there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not acting according to the flesh and behaving in an ordinary human way?" This also exposes a deeper question of how one can be a Christian at odds with other Christians. The emphasis is on the "how."

So often, the push in discussions of religion is to make distinctions and to emphasize our differences. I recently experienced just the opposite, when I made a presentation on the Eucharist and the ancient church to the students and faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary, a leading Evangelical Seminary. I explained the meaning and structure of the ancient liturgy of the Church, the vestments, the furnishings, the vessels, and the scriptural nature of the prayers. Their faces revealed the enlightenment that occurred within their hearts and minds as they listened with great openness and eager receptivity. The impression that many in the audience may have once had of a Catholic Eucharist that was no more than rigid formalism and dead ritualism now gave way to an overwhelming impression of deep beauty and rich spirituality.

We followed this lecture with the celebration of the Eucharist, in which a profound and Spirit-filled experience of worship and unity was entered into by all. This was no longer a discussion or disagreement about theological concepts, but an ineffable encounter with the Divine Mystery beyond human ideas. No one can argue with such an encounter with authentic communion. It simply is! We know the encounter in the "within" of our hearts, in a place that transcends ideas and concepts. And, we know the encounter in the mystical community, the Body of Christ, alive in our presence. Such an experience with Christ is primal and life-changing.

I have often noticed that when there is disagreement among people, we tend to emphasize our differences, and ignore our commonalities. I am told that in conflict resolution, a facilitator will usually try to help the parties involved to do just the opposite - to recognize and affirm with each other their areas of agreement. Then, and only then, will those in conflict have a foundation of commonality on which to build mutual understanding, rather than continuing an endless battle over their differences.

A truly ecumenical approach to the differences between Christian Churches - or even between Christian individuals - is to start with what is shared in common. And, what we share in common far exceeds the differences between us. This is the beginning of dialogue. This is the beginning of a partaking of the fruit of communion. Too often we refuse to speak with those "on the other side." We want them to accept our theological positions and ideas before we talk to them. We find virtue in "standing fast" with our point of view. In the midst of such pain and opposition, we make no headway, experience more fracturing of the Body of Christ, and, worse, miss the presence of God's grace in our midst - something characterized always by patience, love and peace.



The great Russian icon painter, Andre Rublev, created an icon of the Holy Trinity that is based upon the visitation of the three angels to Abraham and Sarah - from the Book of Genesis. What is striking about this icon is that it depicts three heavenly beings involved in a conversation. The image of the three in conversation is meant to symbolize the Holy Trinity in that the conversation is central to the symbolism. We call this conversation "proceeding," as in the traditional description that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father."

My dear friend, Father Ned Reidy, recently shared with me concerning this word, "conversation." "Literally from the Latin it means to 'turn to the other and face the other'....from "versus" and "con".....not just speak to the other alone....but to turn your body and even your chair to the other as a sense of honoring the other...but also it is a silent declaration that at this moment

you and your words are such a gift to me that I stop everything else in order to honor you...this moment and your words...to literally hang on every word and sound that comes forward from you to me...it's a wonderful image and again reflecting the communion and intimacy of the dialogue."

So conversation means life. All life is a conversation - a give and take between two or more who share a common life, a communion of being. Marriage is a conversation of body and soul. Even the Eucharist is a solemn conversation - an ebb and flow between the Body of Christ and the members of His Body each in their respective roles. In its totality (proclamation of the word, sign of peace, Holy Eucharist, etc.) it is an experience of God, for it is an experience of connection, acceptance, and oneness. Again, it is a communion (*koinonia*) of being. Jesus prayed that this conversation might never end. In John 17:21, he asked that all might be one in the same way as He is one with the Father. His oneness with the Father is unity in diversity - the unity not eliminating the distinction, but maintaining it through the oneness of love. Again, this is communion of love. Without love there is no communion.

The great task of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion is the prophetic call for a conversation both within, among ourselves, and without, among those who are not affiliated with our particular ecclesial structure. (This, by the way, is why we participate, in a supportive way, with our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Reform Movement as well as with our sisters and brothers in the Anglican Communion.) Though our own ECC communities vary in style, we are in conversation - hoping to find parallels before we point out the differences. Our ideas might differ, our limited understanding of the infinite and unknowable mystery might differ, but the call of the Spirit is for us to maintain a communion that will affirm our basic Catholic identity.

So we actively seek to engage others - in the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, other Catholic and Apostolic Churches, Evangelical Churches and those Churches further from the Catholic tradition. Competition is not the call of the Gospel. It never was. Conversation is the call - conversation so deep that it quickly turns into a divine encounter - the Spirit speaking from heart to heart, taking us from glory to glory. This, by definition, is authentic communion, *koinonia*!

The lecture at Fuller began as a conversation, and was completed as an experience of authentic communion. It so bonded all those present, that no one walked away doubting God's presence among us. This is the hallmark of true ecumenism. This is the great work of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. We are to call those who have been left outside such a conversation into a dialogue that will result in a realization of a holy communion of Love.

We began by calling those marginalized by the Church: divorced people, married priests, gay and lesbian people, women seeking ordination, those damaged by a painful experience of a divided church. Now we must also turn back and engage with those who seemed to be the ones marginalizing people. Too often we have characterized them as "the enemy." Jesus cautions us about this. Christians are to have no enemies, for they are to love their perceived enemies and pray for those who persecute them.



The wonderful Christian saint and writer, Corrie ten Boom, was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, and saw her sister die there. She was eventually released from the concentration camp. After the war, she first founded a place of recovery for the victims of such Nazi camps - that they might be healed in body and heart. But, the next place she founded was for the former guards in the Nazi camps. She realized that they too were victims. Their hearts were so damaged that they were able to inflict tremendous pain on other human beings. They would suffer from the memories of their own cruelty.

Though we do not often deal with such extreme circumstances, we find conflict and anger in the very human hearts of the Church. The Ecumenical Catholic Communion - every member - is called to this ministry of reconciliation. It is not enough to protest the injustice of the past. We must actively seek to heal such brokenness caused by religious injustice and intolerance. If we do not, the infection of anger remains, and the pain manifests itself in harsh meetings, troubling encounters with each other, emotional bruises that will not heal, and resentment that leads to a broken communion. We cannot afford such pain at the cost of hope and peace. And,

more importantly, the larger Body of Christ cannot afford such pain and division at the cost of hope and peace.

What we can afford is time - time for conversation and for relationship. If we reflect this quality of the Holy Trinity within our communion, within our local communities, and within our personal relationships, we shall discover the beauty and power of the Three-in-One in our very hearts which is a sharing in the very life of God.